VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT: RICH AND BARBARA QUINN

FOOTPRINT
Fall 2021 Volume 37 Issue 4

Florida Trail Association

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Gateway Communities: Building Connections Along the Trail
Love it like you built it. Because you did.

In support of Florida’s vibrant outdoor community, since 2014 the co-op has been able to contribute over $85,000 to stewarding the Florida Trail and other natural spaces around the state. Come by and see us at your local REI before heading out to enjoy the fresh air, or visit online at REI.com.
The Magazine of the Florida Trail Association

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OUR MAGAZINE
The Footprint is published by the Florida Trail Association, a volunteer-based nonprofit organization focused on Florida hiking and trail building. Since 1966, the primary mission of our organization has been the care and protection of the Florida Trail, a 1,500-mile footpath across the Sunshine State - Florida’s own National Scenic Trail.

OUR GOAL
To provide outreach to our readers through informative articles that express appreciation for and conservation of the natural beauty of Florida; to inform our readers of Florida Trail Association efforts; and to provide information on Florida hiking and outdoor recreation opportunities.

CONTRIBUTORS
Please contact the editor at communications@floridatrail.org to discuss ideas for feature stories prior to submission.

MEMBERSHIP
As a Florida Trail member, you receive a subscription to The Footprint magazine, membership in a local chapter, a local newsletter with local activities, opportunities for outdoor skills training, participation in regional and annual conferences and more. To become a member, you can visit our website, mail in the form on the last page of this magazine, or call 352-378-8823.

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Reach a highly targeted demographic of Florida outdoor enthusiasts by advertising with us or becoming a regular sponsor. Your advertising dollars directly support production and publication of this magazine and assist the Florida Trail Association in fulfilling its mission. Call 877-HIKE-FLA or email communications@floridatrail.org for more details.

LIMITED EDITION 2022 CALENDAR
GET YOURS TODAY!

This year marks the 55th Anniversary of the first orange blaze and the start of the Florida Trail.
In thanks for your donation of $55* or more we will send you a complimentary copy of our first “Official Calendar of the Florida Trail Association”.
The 12” x 12” wall calendar photos were selected from over 500 submissions by FTA members and enthusiasts. Experience the beauty and wonder of the Florida Trail every day for 16 months beginning September 2021.
*Does not count towards membership dues. Your contribution will support our mission to protect the Florida Trail System. Please allow 6 to 8 weeks for delivery.
Calendars can also be purchased online at the FTA Store.
Imagine a world where thru-hiking the Florida Trail is made as simple and fun as possible by a well-established community of experienced hikers, educational resources, online forums, workshops and gatherings. We’re a lot closer to that vision than we’ve ever been before, thanks to the hard work of the Florida Trail Hikers Alliance, an educational non-profit organization formed in 2014.

When I first started at the Florida Trail Association (FTA), a long-time volunteer explained the organizations that support the Florida Trail to me as three legs of a stool. Those legs include the FTA, focused on the building and maintenance of the trail, the US Forest Service, focused on the management and completion of the trail, and the Florida Trail Hikers Alliance (FTHA), which serves as a user resource and support group. Each organization does much more than that, and we have plenty of overlapping goals, but each of these unique roles is vital to the success and sustainability of the Florida Trail. Without one leg of the stool, it falls apart.

The FTHA had grassroots beginnings from four hikers who had transformative experiences hiking the Florida Trail, and wanted to draw more hikers to share that same experience. Those original founders included Randy and LuAnne Anderson, local trail angels who had the idea for a Florida Trail Kickoff event and Billy Goat Day (an annual hiker reunion). They joined forces with Sandra Friend and John Keatley, who had just attempted an Appalachian Trail thru-hike, and realized that the Florida Trail needed a guidebook similar to the AT Guide. Armed with an understanding of what long distance hikers needed—along with help from David Miller, the author of the AT Guide and a neighbor of John’s—they researched and created The Florida Trail Guide.

The first edition of the Florida Trail Guide generated an incredible amount of interest, and sparked Sandra, John, Randy and LuAnne to come together and brainstorm how they could create a support organization for hikers on the Florida Trail. They decided to model an organization after the Appalachian Long Distance Hikers Association, which provides hiker recognition, a guidebook, training, and an annual gathering which combines a reunion with workshops on trail-related subjects.

Today, the FTHA consists of a vast network of supporters, volunteers, trail angels and social media followers. The work of these individuals has undoubtedly contributed to the rising reputation and usership of the Florida Trail. Today, according to a study conducted by the University of Florida, the Florida Trail sees over 360,000 users annually. This includes approximately 50-100 thru-hikers. While usership of the Florida Trail is steadily increasing, there is still plenty of work to be done in getting the word out about the trail.

Randy Anderson explains his “sales pitch” to prospective hikers: “For years I encouraged hikers to come and enjoy the beautiful winter hike that only Florida can afford, with moderate success in enticing hikers from other National Scenic Trails to come and join us. In recent years I have been using

Above: Sandy, John, Randy, LuAnne and others at the 2016 Florida Trail Kickoff, an annual gathering at the beginning of thru-hiker season. The event encourages long distance hiker camaraderie, and provides low-cost camping and shuttle support to the southern terminus. It also gives hikers the opportunity to meet some of the trail angels of the Florida Trail.
(Continued from page 7.) A different approach which has increased interest exponentially. I usually start off by saying ‘I don’t think you’re tough enough to handle our trail.’ This statement raises their interest in what truly is a challenging 1,100-mile adventure. Now that I have their attention, I explain that we have water to wade through, snakes and gators to deal with, and at times, freezing temperatures. I also remind them that many triple-crown hikers (those who have completed the Appalachian Trail, the Pacific Crest Trail, and the Continental Divide Trail) have commented about the difficult nature of repetitive walking on flat surfaces and have stated that this is no ‘walk in the park.’ In addition to its astounding beauty and interesting communities, The Florida National Scenic Trail has its own unique challenges. That, I’ve found, is what long distance hikers are looking for: a true adventure in the winter months.

As thru-hiking has continued to rise in popularity across the country, many prospective hikers have turned to social media outlets to learn about potential trails to hike. This prompted the FTHA to start a “Florida Trail Hikers” Facebook group to replace the forum that used to exist on their website. The group has nearly 11,000 members, and served as an important tool of answering questions, sharing experiences, and generally building the hiking community here in Florida. FTHA also creates smaller, private Facebook groups each year for those planning to thru-hike. The smaller group makes coordinating on-the-ground support for hikers safer and easier.

The FTHA aims to create trail ambassadors out of every thru-hiker they work with, encouraging them to spread the word about the trail all over the country and the world after their hike. Many of these “ambassadors” have shared their thru-hikes through word of mouth, podcasts and their own social media accounts. Chris Bell, President of the FTHA, explains, “Hikers with notoriety and a large social media presence among the hiking community like Jupiter, Dixie, Larry Bay, Odyssey, and many others have definitely helped bring notoriety to the Florida Trail. Florida Trail centered podcasts like the Orange Blaze podcast have also helped promote the trail to a larger audience, as well as those who have shared their Florida Trail experience on well known backpacking podcasts.”

That said, you don’t have to be a social media influencer to help the FTHA. There are plenty of other ways to get involved if you are interested in helping long distance hikers.

The long distance hiking community here in Florida, developed by the FTHA and others, is a unique one in the National Trails System. The Florida Trail has far fewer thru-hikers than the more widely known trails like the Appalachian or Pacific Crest, and as a result, has a smaller number of trail angels. But many hikers see this as a positive. The Florida Trail offers a more solitary hike and a more close-knit community of hikers supporting hikers.

“It has become challenging for me to get to the trail as often as I would like. Supporting hikers keeps me connected to the trail, forces me to visit the trail much more often, and also lets me meet new people from all walks of life. I also think I am making the world a little better. What more could one ask for.” – Ari Hirschman, FTHA Volunteer

Thank you to Sandra Friend, Ari Hirschman, Chris Bell and Randy Anderson for their contributions to this article.

WAYS TO HELP HIKERS ON THE TRAIL

- Live near the Florida Trail? Share local knowledge and conditions on the Florida Trail Hikers group on Facebook.
- Assist section hikers and weekend backpackers by helping them stage vehicles for section hikes. In addition, during the spring and fall hiking season, both thru-hikers and section hikers may be in need of assistance getting to either terminus of the trail, or need help for resupply along long stretches where there are no services.
- If you’ve hiked the Florida Trail, share your story with the FTHA, either in writing or images. If you have a knack for public speaking, you can help their efforts in presenting workshops.
- At FTHA gatherings and events, you can help by shuttling hikers to and/or from the trail to the event, coordinating donations of food, food preparation, public outreach or other logistical coordination.

REI Co-Op is now selling Florida Trail Association merchandise, maps, stickers, data books, and more! Stop into the Boca Raton, Gainesville, Jacksonville, Tampa, or Winter park REI stores to check out their new displays and find map sets curated specifically for your region!

FLORIDA TRAIL HIKERS ALLIANCE

Billy Goat Day is a Florida Trail hiker reunion, and celebration of the birthday of legendary long distance hiker “Billy Goats” Photo of 2018 celebration courtesy of Sandra Friend.
Barbara accepts the John Weary Trail Worker Award 2019 earned by both she and Rich, in 2020.

Rich welcomes a group of volunteers during their annual work week in 2020.

Rich and Barbara hiking a section of the Florida Trail (Photo taken in 2016)

Footprint

Fall 2021 Florida Trail Association
that we started the day at the Cracker Trail Country Store on US-98 instead of the Trekker work shed a mile down the road. Rich explained that he liked to bring business to the store. By starting here, most folks ran inside for a coffee and those same volunteers found themselves returning there after for a cold beverage and a snack. The Cracker Trail Country Store has recently come on board as a Gateway Community passport stamp location and is very accustomed to seeing hikers and volunteers alike.

“When I first started hiking, I saw the huge economic impact of trails. The communities got a lot of self-worth from what they did for hikers and the hikers needed them. It was a really symbiotic relationship,” shared Barbara. “In seeing that, it became important to me that the Florida Trail survive. To survive, it needs thru-hikers and we have a sense of responsibility to maintain it for those hikers.”

Rich and Barbara are always ready to serve the thru-hiking community themselves. Every work party, even single day events, the Quinns can be found with a cooler of extra snacks, water and electrolytes. They communicate with thru-hikers and give them rides and advice about the region. They arrange meetings at work sites so hikers can rest and charge their phones. While working on a temporary reroute with the Quinns one day, I met a NOBO thru-hiker who Rich had planned to meet. As soon as he arrived, we stopped what we were doing and they spread out an assortment of resupply items for him. After swapping stories with him, he shared his gratitude for the refuel as well as the well-maintained region before heading on his way.

In their region, the Quinns have also worked to build relationships with the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD), the host of most of the lands they maintain. Their introduction to the District was not a pleasant one at first, although they both look back on it with laughter now. “I first met SFWMD when Abe and I sunk my old truck up to the frame. We were trying to retrieve a mower and it was only 50 yards off the road. Unfortunately, it was just mud and clay,” remembers Rich. “When SFWMD arrived to help pull us out he said ‘You know–if you see cattails, you probably shouldn’t be driving there.’ No one got upset, we got the truck out and laughed our butts off.” Over the years, that relationship has grown and strengthened. Rich is grateful to the District for their support of projects, increased access to the lands for maintenance and notifications regarding prescribed burns.

Abe Christian, Florida Trail Technical Advisor, and Rich Quinn wait to be rescued. (Photo taken in 2017)

THE QUINN’S FAVORITE:

FLORIDA TRAIL SECTION
Barb- Of course it is in our region, the Cathedral of Palms in Starvation Slough
Rich- Ocala National Forest….and the 88 Store.

FAVORITE TRAIL OTHER THAN THE FLORIDA TRAIL
Barb- Franconia Ridge on the AT in New Hampshire
Rich- The Camino De Santiago. It was just a great experience.

Bath- We’ve also hiked and loved the Foot hills Trail and Superior Trail. The John Muir Trail is to die for as well.

FAVORITE TRAIL MAINTENANCE MEMORY
Barb- It is always a good day if I don’t fall in mud. I really liked the women’s work party (2020). We got some serious stuff done.
Rich- I really enjoyed the Southern New Hampshire University Student work party (2020). They did a fantastic job and it was so great to see so many young folks getting out there.

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Rich (wearing orange) leads a team in Duck Slough repairing fire damage, in 2020.
At Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park, which serves as home base for the chapter during their annual work week, the relationship building is just as important and evident. Recently, I accompanied the chapter on a rebuild of a bridge along Duck Slough. A prescribed burn had accidentally taken out a section of the structure. KPPSP had supplied the materials and helped get them to the site. The chapter then learned that a bridge along a trail not connected to the Florida Trail had been damaged. Even though it wasn’t their responsibility, they knew they could knock it out quickly for the park so that their rangers could focus on other issues.

The Quinns feel confident about the future of the Florida Trail and feel that as more thru-hikers discover the Florida Trail and spread the word, it will grow in notoriety. Over their time with the FTA, they said the support from the FTA team and USFS has allowed them to grow and improve the trail in new ways. Of course, they acknowledge that the only way to make sure there is a trail for the rancher’s grandsons and great grandsons to explore, is a continued emphasis of recruiting the next generation of volunteers. "In the early days, we were separate groups with the same name but no real relationships," said Barbara "Now it feels like across the system we have the same goals and we are all committed to them." Rich added, "It is so important that we continue to build community and learn from each other in other chapters."
Salt marshes are the dominant habitat along the Big Bend coastline from Apalachicola to Tampa Bay. These shorelines are characterized by daily tidal flooding and specially adapted places in Florida, and their remoteness serves as a big draw for those seeking outdoor adventures. For northbound hikers, the first glimpse of this unique environment arrives soon after they reach the eastern boundary of the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge. One of 568 wildlife refuges around the country that are administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, St. Marks is also one of the oldest. It was founded in 1931 to protect important wintering habitat for migratory birds; the coastline lies at a unique point that contains the extreme ranges of species normally found both far to the north and far to the south. Today the refuge spans over 80,000 acres in Wakulla, Jefferson, and Taylor counties, providing a protected habitat for innumerable species of wildlife while also hosting almost 40 miles of the Florida Trail. Many sections of the trail are located along levees that cross the marshes, offering sweeping views of the wetlands, mud flats, and Gulf of Mexico on the horizon. Fiddler crabs scurry underfoot, alligators lounge in the sun, and wading birds stalk the shallows. There’s no better place for wildlife viewing along the entire trail, and every year hundreds of visitors descend on the refuge to try and catch sight of uncommon birds like the Scarlet Tanager, Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, or Mangrove Cuckoo.

One highlight of the Florida Trail within St. Marks is the passage through the Port Leon Wilderness, one of only a handful of such areas within Florida. In the context “wilderness” is more than just a description of a remote or wild place; this is actually a legal definition of a federally designated area that contains the extreme ranges of species normally found both far to the north and far to the south. Today the refuge spans over 80,000 acres in Wakulla, Jefferson, and Taylor counties, providing a protected habitat for innumerable species of wildlife while also hosting almost 40 miles of the Florida Trail. Many sections of the trail are located along levees that cross the marshes, offering sweeping views of the wetlands, mud flats, and Gulf of Mexico on the horizon. Fiddler crabs scurry underfoot, alligators lounge in the sun, and wading birds stalk the shallows. There’s no better place for wildlife viewing along the entire trail, and every year hundreds of visitors descend on the refuge to try and catch sight of uncommon birds like the Scarlet Tanager, Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, or Mangrove Cuckoo.

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covering the entire distance from Tallahassee—St. Marks Historic Railroad State Refuge and then onward into the Apalachee National Forest. The western stretch of the refuge ventures deeper inland from the coastal marshes; highlights include the Cathedral of Palms, Shepherd Spring, and the Spring Creek area, where FTA will soon be working with our partners to build a major bridge after older boardwalks were damaged by storm surge.

Interested in exploring the Florida Trail in St. Marks? This coming spring the Apalachee Chapter, based out of Tallahassee, is hosting the 2022 IDIDAHIKE at the St. Marks Refuge. IDIDAHIKE is an annual outdoor event and fundraiser for the Florida Trail Association designed to showcase the wonderful and abundant trails in the North Florida Big Bend area; many past events took place along the Suwannee River. Scheduled for February 26 & 27, the event features five hikes, a silent auction, education and environment booths, and the chance to connect with hikers and volunteers from all over Florida. FTA volunteers are also needed to help setup and coordinate the event! For more information, see: http://apalachee.floridatrail.org/IDIDAHIKE. If you’d like to get involved with other recreational hikes or trail maintenance in this region, you can connect with the Apalachee Chapter at: https://www.meetup.com/Apalachee-Florida-Trail-Hiking/.

The historic city of St. Marks is one of the Florida National Scenic Trail’s Gateway Communities. The area offers a variety of hikes along the Florida Trail. For more info about the area including accommodations, restaurants, and things to do - check out cityofstmarks.com and visitwakulla.com.

IDIDAHIKE 2022
FEBRUARY 26 & 27

AN OUTDOOR EVENT TO BENEFIT THE FLORIDA TRAIL ASSOCIATION AND OUR FLORIDA NATIONAL SCENIC TRAIL

CITY OF ST. MARKS, FL

The historic city of St. Marks is one of the Florida National Scenic Trail’s Gateway Communities. The area offers a variety of hikes along the Florida Trail. For more info about the area including accommodations, restaurants, and things to do - check out cityofstmarks.com and visitwakulla.com.

INFORMATION & UPDATES CAN BE FOUND AT: APALACHEE.FLORIDATRAIL.ORG/IDIDAHIKE

QUESTIONS PLEASE CONTACT US AT: FTAIDIDAHIKE2022@GMAIL.COM

Save the dates!
The trail provides a common refrain within the hiking community. This sentiment expresses a sense of gratitude and open-mindedness to accept whatever may come your way, and reflects an attitude that things have a natural way of working out. After a string of setbacks, something good may come to hikers in the form of what is known as trail magic: a wondrous moment you might experience in the natural world while on the trail, or an act of goodwill by another person. Perhaps you find the perfect campsite in the nick of time to provide shelter from an incoming storm. Maybe you lose your spoon and find another on a picnic table (true story, this happened to me!). It could even be a beautiful sunrise on Lake Okeechobee that lifts your spirits—that's trail magic. These instances of profound beauty could even be a beautiful sunrise on Lake Okeechobee that lifts your spirits—that's trail magic. These instances of profound beauty

Oftentimes trail magic comes not from a nebulous mystical force, but the generosity of angels in the form of rides into town, feeding hungry hikers, or an act of goodwill by another person. Sometimes an unlikely committer becomes a trail angel by offering to help a hiker at random. On the backroads of Florida during my thru-hike in early 2020, I met many local residents who were unaware that the Florida Trail ran through their backyard. They were inquisitive about what we hikers were up to, and this often served as an educational moment to share knowledge about the trail and the hiking community. Thru-hiker by the name of “Larry Boy” shared a story about a similar interaction on the Big Cypress Seminole Indian Reservation during his interview on the Orange Blaze podcast. While Larry Boy was hiking a stretch of road within the reservation, a woman pulled over to greet him, curious about the number of hikers she’d seen. When Larry Boy told her about thru-hiking on the Florida Trail, she was enchanted with the notion that he had trekked through Big Cypress National Preserve. As a memento, she gave him a handmade quilled pouch with traditional herbal remedies tucked inside, as well as a copy of the tribal newspaper. She expressed that she wanted to give him a sense of tribal culture and a word of encouragement. Larry Boy suggested that making that connection with the trail “changed her understanding of the place she lived, and changed my understanding of the place I was hiking.” He added that ours is “not a big community, but a tight-knit community. Those who are in on the secret of the Florida Trail do a great job in supporting it.”

Around the panhandle, hikers start chattering about Hillcrest Baptist Church. As the Florida Trail gains recognition amongst the long-distance hiking community, so does our trail angels. After the wilderness of Apalachee National Forest, the trail follows a 20-mile long roadwalk, and hikers look forward to some much-needed rest at Hillcrest’s Hiker Shack. “Hikers who aren’t connected on social media learn about the Hiker Shack by word of mouth on the trail,” shares trail angel Wilton Quattlebaum, pastor at Hillcrest Baptist Church, and true Florida Trail legend. “I have received many messages from trail angels sharing information, etc., I started to help other hikers,” shared Ari. Some hikers who rec-
TRAIL ANGELS RESTORED MY FAITH IN HUMANITY AND REMINDED ME THAT THERE ARE STILL MANY AMAZING PEOPLE OUT THERE. AFTER RECEIVING SO MUCH LOVE FROM COMPLETE STRANGERS, ALL I COULD DO WAS TRY AND REPAY IT BY GIVING MY OWN LOVE TO HIkers DURING THE 2021 SEASON.

- BEN DORNEY, 2020 THRU-HIKER

I REMEMBER NOT FEELING GREAT AFTER DRINKING THE CANAL WATER, SO I THOUGHT I COULD MAKE LIFE EASIER AND MAKE THAT EXPERIENCE BETTER FOR HIkers. LAST YEAR I PLACED AROUND 120 GALLONS ON THE TRAIL, AND WE WERE SHORT A CACHE BECAUSE OF THE RESERVATION CLOSURE. I AM EXPECTING TO DELIVER JUST UNDER 200 GALLONS THIS SEASON.”

- ARI HIRSCHMAN

Dozens of water jugs in the back of Ari’s vehicle ready to be distributed along the trail.

Trail Angel Trucker Bob and Ben Dorney

How to Connect with Hikers

- Be on the lookout for hikers from November - March. Thru-hikers usually start their journey within the first week of January, and most folks travel NOBO.

- Frequent social media pages: Florida Trail Hikers is the Florida Trail Hikers Alliance’s public Facebook group where hikers seeking information about trail conditions, camping, hike planning, and more can ask the experts. Within this group is a private group specifically for current year thru-hikers and section hikers to interact with current trail angels and trail maintainers.

- Connect with folks already doing trail magic and see how you can help. If you don’t know where to start, connect with a seasoned trail angel.

- If you live in a Gateway Community, go to places that hikers go: supermarkets, post offices, and restaurants. Say hello and offer help when appropriate.

- Practice caution and common sense. Hikers and trail angels alike should use their best judgement when interacting with new people.

- Link up with Florida Trail Hikers Alliance floridatrailhikers.org

Alongside the good-hearted nature, graciousness, and appreciation, there seems to be a symbiotic relationship at work. Hikers provide a boost of inspiration, an exciting story, or an alternative perspective on life, and trail angels restore our faith in humanity. These gifts of time and attention build a sense of community and connection within the hiking world. A thru-hike is not just a tromp through the woods—it’s an experience that connects people to nature, trail communities, and each other.

The Florida Trail is unique to its own amongst trail communities. The trail angel community breathes a feeling of warmth, hope, and support to a thru-hiker. At the end of the trail, you have the feeling of accomplishment as well as the feeling you have made friends to remember.

- Heather Housekeeper aka Bot and Scott Weis aka Wiseman, 2019 thru-hikers

I have had the marvellous privilege of being on both ends of the giving and receiving of trail magic, and I have been blessed to have met many amazing people in the trail community. I am fortunate to live near the Florida Trail in Crestview, a Gateway Community. There is a long road walk that goes directly through my hometown here and I am happy to help hikers that make their way through this area. I just love helping hikers and listening to them as they share their amazing trail experiences. I feel that trail magic can form a lasting bond in the trail community.

- Sean Spence aka FlatTop, 2020 thru-hiker.

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Alongside the good-hearted nature, graciousness, and appreciation, there seems to be a symbiotic relationship at work. Hikers provide a boost of inspiration, an exciting story, or an alternative perspective on life, and trail angels restore our faith in humanity. These gifts of time and attention build a sense of community and connection within the hiking world. A thru-hike is not just a tromp through the woods—it’s an experience that connects people to nature, trail communities, and each other.

- Heather Houskeeper aka Bot and Scott Weis aka Wiseman, 2019 thru-hikers

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THE BACKSTORY

I moved to the mainland United States from the beautiful Isla del Encanto in 2015, a calculated move that hundreds of young Puerto Ricans make every year in the pursuit of professional growth opportunities and first-hand creation of generational wealth. For many, boricua pride is underscored by a sense of inadequacy in time and place, a near-hopelessness with nowhere to go and nothing to look forward to. For many of us who decide to jump ship, leaving most or all we’ve known behind becomes a defining part of our lives, a sort of before and after point in the story of us as individuals and a collective, La diáspora.

The first few months I spent in my new home state, Virginia, I lived in a constant interpersonal and social quandary. The realities of adulthood—a long commute to and from work, tax deductions, deflating each paycheck, bills to pay—were compounded by the sheer terror I felt regarding having to do this all away from those I loved. The struggle came from both a place of inadequacy in time and place, a conflict of coming of age as well as immigration, in which there was no path out except the one I forged on my own.

Later that year, a group of friends and I hiked to McAfee’s Knob, arguably the most popular day hike in Virginia as well as the most photographed spot of the Appalachian Trail. It’s a walk that thousands make every year, and it became my introduction to the state’s outdoor recreational opportunities. I’d hiked a handful of times before, but my personal story was different then. In that present day over six years ago, I found a sprinkle of solace, a sort of escape from the loneliness and sadness I dealt with in private.

During the struggle and confusion of moving, the trails automatically became a refuge. Surprisingly, some of the state’s natural features—the lush green forests, crystal blue water holes, the rooted paths—all found ways to mirror the Puerto Rico I loved and missed. At times, I could go back and forth between revealing in childhood memories of running around barefoot in my parents’ farm in Arecibo and planning out future hikes where I could run around barefoot elsewhere. When I was outside hiking on my own, I could once again think, pray, and speak in Spanish to the forest; I didn’t need to fit myself into someone else’s box just to communicate or fit in.

Over the years, I’ve found home on all sorts of paths around the world—from sandy beachescapes to rugged granite mountaintops to jungle forests. I’m grateful for the trails which provided a space for the very real, confusing, incredibly lonely times I’ve gone through and helped me heal in ways I’m still astounded by. I shed the grief and shame I struggled with for years at the trailheads that slowly but surely made me feel whole in unique ways. Hiking helped me reconnect with the parts of me I thought I’d lost access to (like sharing my love of nature with and next to my mom), as well as tap into other parts I didn’t know even existed within me. I’ve met people who share similar uprooting stories to my own; the trails have provided a family. For a long time, I resisted rebranding what “home” was, but now, I find home on the trails wherever I go.

During Latinx Conservation Week 2021, Latinxhikers and the Appalachian Trail Conservancy co-sponsored a “Reflection Hike and Potluck” event in the Blood Mountain Wilderness in Georgia.

The Florida Trail Data Book

FINDING PURPOSE IN THE PRESENT

The trails have been a big part of my personal upbringing since moving to the states, and I know they can become a source of growth and reconnection for so many other people like me. And yet, I recognize many people within the Latinx community face challenges that make outdoor recreation difficult or plainly inaccessible, especially in National Scenic Trails or National Parks (many of which require long distance travel). By noticing these challenges and advocating for solutions to “bridge the gaps,” I can create opportunities that provide a space for my people to know and care for the outdoor spaces like I do. Because of that, it’s not by mistake or happenstance that today I find myself as the Latinx Partnerships Coordinator for both the Florida Trail Association and the Appalachian Trail Conservancy.

This joint ATC/FTA role was created a few years ago with the goal of expanding diversity in outdoor and volunteer spaces, but my personal mission within this role is to support the involvement, education, and leadership advancement of Latinx/Hispanic trail users along the Florida Trail and Appalachian trail corridor in a manner that is strategic, sustainable, and adaptable. This mission can be accomplished in the following ways:

- Increasing access to educational content
- Providing a platform for Latinx/Hispanic voices
- Offering opportunities for meaningful interactions on the trail
- Leveraging focus groups to enhance recreational events
- Championing unique experiences for select individuals (engaged community members) to participate in leadership growth opportunities

The 14th Edition of The Florida Trail Data Book

EDITED BY DON MOCK
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THE FUTURE IS PROMISING

There’s much to feel conflicted about lately, but there’s one thing I feel a sense of promise: the Latinx community in the states is a growing force of good. Statistically, we are the largest ethnic group in the U.S., and constantly changing the societal, economic, and environmental aspects that make this country what it is today. To invite us into the great outdoors is an opportunity for all to learn from each other, and learn how to best take care of our natural resources together.

We come from peoples with deep ties to ancestral lands for away from where we live and work today, but we have within us a desire to connect and protect these lands too.

There are over a million Puerto Ricans and many more Hispanic/Latinx identifying people in Florida alone, and I hope they find fulfillment on the trails like I did. Home, as I’ve come to understand, can be a continuum of dirt paths and rocky trails that guide us to our best selves. With the mission in mind, I’ll continue to work alongside many other devoted individuals to bring soul enriching opportunities in nature closer to our people, and in turn, develop advocates for the protection of the most beautiful outdoor spaces in the world.

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Building Connections Along the Trail

It’s no secret that Florida Trail Gateway Communities offer hikers much needed respite from the trail. The typical agenda of a hiker rolling into town includes a hot shower, laundry, sleeping in a warm bed, and eating something decent and calorically dense. Over the stretch of 1,500 miles along the Florida Trail, hikers can usually find what they need in our Gateway Communities. While the amenities serve a crucial role in supporting hikers, there are some unique-ly Floridaian gems in these towns that help gain a greater appreciation for the localities along the Florida Trail as well as a deeper understanding of our unique culture, natural landscape, and history.

Beyond providing the essentials, Gateway Communities add character to the hiking experience, offering local color and friendly conversation after a stretch of solitude in the woods. As you stroll into town with trekking poles and a big pack, folks get curious about what you’re up to. They might ask what kind of critters you’ve seen in the woods, or what motivated you to hike the trail—and it is fun to connect with them. While these interac-tions might seem insignificant, conversations like this help create a bond between trail users and community members, and might even encourage someone new to get out on the trail.

Several Gateway Communities feature historic or cultural museums and interpretive sites that enhance the trail experience. In the town of Inverness on the Western Corri-dor, the historic site of the Old Courthouse Heritage Museum nearly faced demolition before community members collaborated to have it placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The museum partnered with the Florida Museum of Natural History to create the Chassahowitzka Springs archae-ological exhibit, which showcases artifacts ranging from early Paleolithic to mod-ern-day ecological view through the lens of the significant nearby waterways. Education about Florida’s original inhabitants as well as the fragility of our environment helps trail users and community members become good stewards of the land and our rich history. The Clewiston Museum has an impress-ive fossil collection, including a skull and tusks from mastodon remains that were discovered in Hendry County, among other extinct animals. Isn’t it wild to imagine those creatures tromping through the same land as the Florida Trail? Taking some time to engage with impactful events from history provides insight and context to the areas the trail winds through and strengthens our bond to the places we visit.

Florida Trail hikers have the opportu-nity to take a break from the trail and view Florida’s unique ecosystems from a differ-ent perspective by taking an airboat ride or a world-class fishing tour in Okeechobee. County Chamber director Paulette Wise says she sees several hikers stopping for resupply before the trek from Basinger to Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park. She encourages hikers to “get off the trail for the afternoon and take advantage of what Okeechobee has to offer,” mentioning great local restaurants and interesting shops in the downtown area.

Gateway Communities receive a lot of appreciation from local businesses who enjoy the footprints of an outdoor trail, creating a buzz for the area’s outdoors and recreation industries. Opportunities like these enrich the Gateway Communities and provide people with a greater appreciation for our state’s natural beauty and history.

Florida Trail Association | FloridaTrail.org

Footprint

Fall 2021

Gateway Communities

By Julie Pollack, Gateway Communities Coordinator

Members of the Florida Trail Association are eligible to join!

Learn more at nwtcu.org/membership

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seeing hikers each season. Back Home Bakery Cafe on Main Street in Crestview offers encouragement to thru-hikers in the form of free brewed coffee. Owners Kimberly and Dorene express their excitement about the hiking season: “We think it’s pretty cool to be directly on the Florida Trail and have the opportunity to be a part of this community!”

It’s clear that these communities are proud to have the trail in their backyard, and the presence of hikers in town brightens their day. Another favorite pitstop for hikers is the TownHouse Restaurant in Oviedo, located right off the multi-use Cross Seminole Trail. The owners shared that, “while hikers aren’t really enough to really impact sales, we LOVE hiker season! During the spring, we get a couple of dozen hikers all kitted out for the long walk.”

As the Florida Trail grows alongside these communities, hikers get a chance to meet folks with whom they have something in common with, whether that’s a passion for Florida’s nature or gaining a sense of community connection. Gateway Communities are kind enough to welcome hikers in each season—learning something new about their locale and supporting local businesses are great ways for hikers to show our appreciation for their hospitality.

Interested in getting involved in the Gateway Communities program? Send an email to gatewaycommunities@floridatrail.org.

Discover the natural beauty of the Florida Trail through this pictorial journey of the trail, end to end.

With a Foreword by Jim Kern and photography by Sandra Friend and John Keatley, this keepsake book showcases the natural wonders and unique features of each section of the Florida Trail in moments captured by Sandra and John.

**Howard Pardue Steps Down from Chapter Council Chair**

by Leslie Wheeler

I can’t remember when I met Howard, and I can barely remember not knowing him. Howard has been a FTA fixture for many years, as an employee, volunteer and leader. Often seen at FTA events with his trusty banjo, his demeanor belies the wealth of knowledge and skill he has provided our organization over the years. I have watched Howard at Board meetings discuss land acquisition issues, lead strategic planning, and act as mentor to staff and officers.

I learned the most about Howard while I was President. Howard was the Chair of the Chapter Council at that time. We managed to see our way past a few disagreements (which now, I can’t even think of what they were) because of our mutual trust and regard for one another. Howard always made sure I thought of the volunteers on the ground. He made the CC more independent and active. Along with a few others, Howard helped to write the new Chapter Operating Procedures (COP). Despite the fact that the project took many months, Howard continued to provide his leadership until the project was completed.

Interesting, I have never been hiking with Howard. I’ve never been to his house, or seen him in dress clothes (ie, without hiking boots). But sometimes, you don’t need to know everything about a person to know their caliber. I wish to thank Howard for his years of working for and with FTA. We are all the better for knowing him, collectively and individually. I hope I get to hike with him soon!
FTA BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Nominations for the Florida Trail Association’s 2022 Board of Directors are now being accepted

The call for nominations is now open for FTA’s 2022 Board of Directors, and we are seeking candidates for five board positions. FTA has a 15-member Board.

The Nominating Committee will select the slate based on nominations received. A slate of officers and at-large Board members for 2022 will be voted upon via electronic voting beginning January 2022. The election results will be announced at the April 2022 Annual Meeting.

The Florida Trail Association is committed to expanding the racial and ethnic diversity, generational and regional representation, and professional experience of our board members.

Serving on FTA’s Board of Directors is a chance to help the organization face challenges, provide creative solutions, contribute to a fast-growing trail program, and affect long-term positive change. Board service also offers you the opportunity to grow personally and professionally, to develop valuable skills in non-profit governance, gain unique experience and make lasting connections with a team of other passionate and motivated professionals.

Please consider serving on the Board and submitting a nomination for the 2022 Florida Trail Association Board of Directors. For more information on our current Board of Directors as well as the general and specific responsibilities of our board members, visit: floridatrail.org/board-of-directors/.

Please send your nominations to nominations@floridatrail.org.

Nominations should include the following information:
1. Name of Nominee, address and contact information (including email address);
2. Brief statement or cover letter outlining why the nominee would like to be a board member;
3. Resume or short background on the candidate in question (work history, non-profit experience, involvement with the FTA, interests etc.); and
4. Reference (optional).

**** NOMINATIONS CLOSE FRIDAY DECEMBER 10, 2021 ****
WELCOME TO THE NEXT GENERATION OF FLORIDA TRAIL LEADERS

In September of 2021, the Florida Trail Association hosted its first meeting to welcome the new leaders of our first Next Generation Coalition. This coalition is made up of 18-30 year olds from all over the state, covering every region of the trail. Their professional fields range from environmental science, to journalism, to urban planning, but one thing they all have in common is their commitment to building a more diverse Florida Trail community for the future generations of hikers and outdoor enthusiasts.

These leaders will be working together over the next year to bring fresh perspectives, faces, and partnerships to the Florida Trail. To read more about these enthusiastic individuals check out the Next Generation page on our website - floridatrail.org/next-gen-coalition/
When you join the state-wide Florida Trail Association you automatically become a member of your local chapter based upon your zip code. However, members may attend the activities of any chapter and may transfer to any chapter they wish simply by informing the FTA Office.

Florida Trail activities are organized by our local chapters and are led by authorized volunteer activity leaders. Many of our activities are open to the general public so you can get to know us before you join. Activities can be found online at floridatrail.org. Click on “About Us” then click on the “Upcoming Events” button on the left. Local activities are usually also listed on the chapter websites, Facebook pages and Meetups. Click on “About Us” then “Our Chapters” for links to local chapter sites.

Participants in activities must sign an Assumption of Risk form and agree to accept personal responsibility for their safety and the safety of accompanying minors. Always contact the activity leader in advance for more information, to let them know you are attending, to find out any special requirements or equipment for the activity, and to check for any last minute changes.

For more information about chapters and links to websites/meetups/photos go online to floridatrail.org/about-us/chapters/ then select the chapter

NOTICE: Please provide complete information on the membership and gift form. The information you provide will be used to send your gift package, keep you informed of Florida Trail Association events, and to publish your promotion in The Footprint.

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www.floridatrail.org