

Student calls trek an adventure of a lifetime

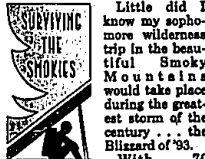
It was during this time 24 inches of snow fell throughout the night. When I awoke in the morning, my co-leader Dylan Cooper (who was added to the group) had to dig me out, and to my amazement there was over two feet of snow.



Souvenir: Members of one group of hikers hold a helicopter crew message board they signed and converted into a souvenir plaque after being rescued. The hikers were taken to a ranger station in North Carolina near the Great Smoky Mountains park. From left are Alex Hall, Dan Stout, Erica Kohler, Brianne O'Laughlin, Megan Slayter and Fred Yun.

Editor's note: Justin Peruski is a Cranbrook-Kingswood sophomore who was part of a group of hikers that included Dylan Cooper, Donald Shin, Gian Piazueli, Keita Ueda, Apple Snider, Alexa Stanard, Meredith Schuette, Katharine Schuette, Katharine Schmier and Mike Jerris.

BY JUSTIN PERUSKI
SPECIAL WRITER



Little did I know my sophomore wilderness trip in the beautiful Smoky Mountains would take place during the greatest storm of the century... the Blizzard of '93. With 70 pounds on my back, seven fellow classmates and two co-leaders, I set off for the adventure of my life. The first week of our expedition the weather was paradise. We hiked in T-shirts and boxer shorts through the majestic Smokies and Appalachian Mountains, partaking in thigh-deep river crossings, 2,600-foot mountaintop hikes, bushwhacks in the scorching heat, up a mountainside entitled "Hell," and soloing as the weather took a change for the worse.

During the first night of my solo, Thursday, March 11, I began to build my shelter. Because of my lack of tent-making skills, I decided to build a fortress out of the broken parts of trees and used a trunk as the main support beam.

For 36 hours I fasted and had no human contact. It was during this time 24 inches of snow fell throughout the night. When I

awoke in the morning, my co-leader Dylan Cooper (who was added to the group) had to dig me out, and to my amazement there was over two feet of snow. That Saturday morning our group agreed to evacuate. We decided to hike out to the nearest road (which was four miles away). However, this was easier said than done. We hiked approximately one mile in the progressing snow and cold, but the trail was nowhere to be found.

We had to go back to Nichol's Cove (the area of our solo). Now the whole group had to pull together. We were all freezing cold and we had to clear away an area for a tent to make a fire. When this was done I had minor frost-bite and hypothermia. The whole crew helped in my speedy recovery, and for that I am very grateful. After I recovered, I helped other people to warm up. What a great learning experience in survival and teamwork.

On Monday, March 15, our group and another trailblazed our way four miles out of the forest to civilization. Wilderness was an experience

that will be with me for the rest of my life. It taught me teamwork, cooperation and a new appreciation for life. Our 11-day adventure brought out every emotion imaginable. We laughed, we cried, we feared, we triumphed.

I thought a hot shower and Domino's pizza were the simple pleasures of life. But the wilderness experience is one that cannot compare.



Digging in: As dusk settled on March 12, the day the storm started, this group of Cranbrook campers led by Ian O'Laughlin and Erica Mackie pushed aside the snow and set up their thin plastic tent.

Teen says it felt awesome to survive the great storm

Editor's note: 16-year-old Brianne O'Laughlin is a sophomore at Cranbrook-Kingswood. She was part of a hiking group that included students Dan Stout, Fred Yun, Alex Hall, Megan Slayter and Erica Kohler.

BY BRIANNE O'LAUGHLIN
SPECIAL WRITER

The main focus of our group's trip was probably surviving after being separated from our two leaders (Jake Kaufman and Nicole Shack). On Friday, March 12, just like normal our leaders left about 30 minutes before us to hike onward to our next campsite.

When we left after about a mile of hiking we came to a junction of three other trails. We couldn't find that junction on our map because we didn't think that we had hiked far enough. So we ended up guessing which trail to take, and it was the wrong guess.

We hiked about four miles out of our way and then decided that definitely we were lost and hiked all the way back to our last campsite, where we had last seen our leaders. Friday was the day that the snow had started falling, actually to be exact it was at about noon (by looking at the sun, we had no watches) when we reached the junction.

It was odd because after we had turned around to hike the five miles back, the snow already was almost knee high. Once we got to our old campsite (it actually was called campsite No. 61), we cooked dinner and set up our tarps for the night. Upon waking up Saturday morning our tarp was almost completely buried in the snow. No one of our group of six (three boys, three girls) wanted to get out in the cold and dig us out of the snow. But we had no choice because the snow continued to bury us even deeper.

So cold
After we all dug out the tarps and restaked the tarps, our fingers and toes were so cold. We would heat them up over one of our stoves, but not for too long because we didn't want to waste a lot of fuel.

We decided that our leaders were either going to come back and search for us, or go to the nearest ranger station. So we stayed in the tarp for all of Saturday and Sunday. We were so bored. We laid in our sleeping bags for both days and sang songs, talked, told brain teasers and some cried.

Finally on Sunday the snow stopped falling and the sun actually came out. We decided on Sunday

that the following day (Monday) we had to start hiking and get some help or find a phone. We remembered Jake and Nicole (our leaders) telling us that if we wanted to dump our trash then we would have to hike to a road which was about 10 miles from this campsite. So we decided that if there were trash cans, then there should be a phone.

On Monday morning we woke up at sunrise. It took us about three or four hours to pack up. Everyone's boots were frozen and all crusty with ice.

One kid, Dan, his boots were folded in half and frozen so he couldn't fit his foot in. We tried to make our boots defrost, just enough to get our feet in, by holding them over the stove. Most everyone's clothes were wet or frozen. We found completely frozen mittens, socks and jackets in the snow under our tarps.

Late morning we finally left camp, all of us hiking in a line with one of us as a leader breaking trail. When the leader would become tired, he or she would drop to the back and a new leader would step in for a little while.

Looking for us?
Monday was the first time that we heard helicopters. We were amazed when thinking that maybe they could be looking for us. Every time we would hear one around us we would freak out and wave red ponchos and mirrors around.

When we were reunited with our co-leaders, we found out that they had left arrows for us and even had left a green bandana with a note on it, but the snow had covered their signals up. Jake and Nicole ended up hiking on Saturday (all during the blizzard) to a ranger station just like we had thought. They wanted to come back out and find us on Sunday but they weren't allowed back into the park. They said that they had never hiked in such horrible weather.

I thought wilderness was a great experience, even considering the weather conditions. It feels awesome to think that I was able to survive a blizzard that brought the worst weather in years to the Smokies.

During the trip I wasn't sure if I ever wanted to do it again, but now I realize that I would definitely love to go back.

Our group got airlifted out by a helicopter on Monday at 1:15 p.m. After the helicopter circled over us and the winds howled through us, two Air Force guys were dropped down on a jungle penetrator. None of us could believe that that helicopter was for us.

Happy trails: Before the blizzard hit there was snow in the higher altitudes, but it was nothing to worry about. Brianne O'Laughlin enjoyed the climb on the second day of the hiking.



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