

*You've done all 48 of New Hampshire's 4,000 ft. peaks. What possessed you to do that?*

It was a friend's idea. Hiking wasn't exactly a childhood passion. I did a little in the Boy Scouts, and remember asking for a fancy backpack for Christmas. I used it once or twice, and it ended up in my parents' attic. The years went by, I got married, we started a family. Then a good friend of mine from high school, who was also married with kids, approached me with the idea of doing all the 4,000 footers in the Whites. As they say, it seemed like a good idea at the time. To give you an idea how little we knew, here's a story. On our first hike, we were on the shoulder of Mt. Washington, when my friend pointed up toward the summit. "What's that smoke up there?" We were convinced it was a fire. It was the engine on the cog railway. But we stuck with our project, and did all 48 peaks, over six or seven years. My love for the mountains wasn't the motive for doing all those hikes. It's the result.

*Does any peak stand out as the hardest?*

I think the hardest peak in the Whites is the weather. They're very small mountains by world standards, but if you're not well prepared, or if you make a bad decision, you can find yourself in deep trouble. People who spend a lot of time in the Whites take them very seriously.

*What possessed you to create J.U.M.P.?*

The idea of wasted potential really upsets me, probably because my own potential could so easily have been wasted. In my senior year of high school, I decided that I wanted to go to engineering school. I was told that it was too late. I hadn't taken the right courses, I hadn't shown enough strength in math, etc. So I entered college as a physical education major, which my high school guidance counselor decided was within my intellectual ability. I spent a "conflicted" semester, let's put it that way, and decided that I had the right to try and become an engineer. Not the right to be one, but the right to try. I could live with trying and failing, but not with giving up just because somebody told me to. To make a long story short, I earned a Master's degree in engineering, and now I'm an engineer. The people I thought had all the answers about what I could and couldn't do . . . well, they didn't.

But discouragement takes different forms. And it usually isn't someone officially telling you that you can't achieve something. I was lucky, because I had supportive parents who were well educated and successful. The people in their social circle were successful. So when I showed some initiative, I got a lot of support. For kids growing up in difficult circumstances, who don't have the affluence and the privileged social networks at their disposal, life can seem like one big "No."

*"No" to college?*

No, it starts earlier than that. Take school sports as an example. Kids learn and gain all kinds of things by participating. When I was growing up, school sports were free. Now they cost a lot of money, and the parents being involved to the gills is practically a given. That privilege is out of reach for the kids we serve.

*Is that where J.U.M.P. comes in?*

That's part of where we come in, by removing the economic hurdle. To go on one of our mountain trips, a kid just needs to show up on Friday afternoon. There's no charge. You don't need to own a thousand dollars' worth of gear. We'll lend you everything you need. We'll feed you. We'll give you a toothbrush and toothpaste if you didn't bring them.

*But hiking and backpacking aren't competitive sports.*

No, they're cooperative sports, and that's how we present them. You need fitness, and skills, and commitment, and toughness, just as you do with competitive sports. But you're not on a soccer field, you're in the mountains. No substitutions, no time-outs, no getting a ride home. It's not a game. We teach a four-part curriculum: finding the way, living outside, staying safe and well, and helping others stay safe and well. We have a small group of kids at this point who are showing some real development. They've gotten stronger physically, they've learned to be more philosophical when they're tired and hungry and a bit sore. They've gotten better at pacing themselves. They've figured out that there are good reasons why we have checklists, and why we do certain things in certain ways when we're on the trail. And we see them helping one other, without us telling them to. A big goal this year is what we call "full-contact backpacking," which is going into the mountains without using the lodges and huts. We're running "dry land training" sessions in town, so the kids can learn the skills and the equipment without any consequences if they mess up. Our best trips are yet to come. All of us are excited.

*You're not against competition, are you?*

Absolutely not. You have to be able to compete in this world. But the competitiveness that matters most, the kind we're trying to build, starts from within. In most situations, people fail not because somebody defeated them, but because they decided that the price they had to pay to reach their goal wasn't worth the effort. And people who think that way are the ones who assume they're going to fail. The first time you tackle something that's not easy, and work at it, work through it, and nail it, that experience changes you. The mountains are perfect for giving kids that experience, that rush of having made the grade.

The problem with competition against others, which most people equate with competition period, is that it can really backfire when you're trying to teach skills to teenagers. They tend to be so self-conscious that they pay more attention to how they think they're being perceived than to whatever it is you're trying to teach them. We operate with a high ratio of adult leaders to participants, so the kids can make mistakes and ask questions and learn skills out of the spotlight. The other thing we do is make teaching a learning tool. If a kid picks up a skill right off the bat, tying a taut-line hitch, for instance, ask him to help the kids who aren't quite getting it. Tell him he's now one of the knot instructors. Now he has a motive to learn the other knots, because knot instructors know all the knots. These are really obvious teaching strategies, but they work.

*How hard are the hikes?*

[Laughs] Well, our goal isn't to beat the kids up, or beat ourselves up. But the trails in the Whites are pretty rugged. The Holt Trail, on Mt. Cardigan, involves scrambling up some exposed rock slabs that

gave a few of our kids some second thoughts, but they all made it up, which I knew they would, and they couldn't stop talking about it afterward. Our approach hikes to the huts, with packs, can take half a day. There are usually a couple of kids and leaders with leftover energy, so they'll go bag a summit while everyone else takes a rest. The big thing is weather. We've hit some torrential rain, and flooded-over foot bridges. We've had to scout for places to cross streams, and then help each other across. The kids would tell you that we've done some hard hikes. Every kid who's started a hike with us has finished it. Some of that might be peer pressure, but most of it is just character. They're great kids. They're proud of what they've accomplished, and they should be. They've learned something about interdependence, and cooperating to solve problems.

*What sort of problems?*

Logistical ones, for example.

*You'll have to explain.*

You have x number of hikers, carrying x amount of stuff over x distance, up x amount of elevation. You need to get all the hikers and all the stuff to the destination before it gets dark. So we talk a lot about how much things weigh, and about how much weight they think each person should carry. So they divvy up the load, and off we go. At some point, their calculation may run into problems. Someone needs some weight removed so he or she can keep going. Someone might need all their weight removed, and it might be a big kid with a big pack. All the stuff in that pack now has to go into other people's packs. It's interesting to watch how the kids solve these problems to keep everyone moving up the trail. What's the best place to put a liter of water? Into someone whose urine color shows they're dehydrated. Hydration is actually part of the curriculum. Anyway, the kids who are figuring out how to reapportion the loads, and taking a bit more than their share, are often the kids who started out not being able to keep up, and needing some help. Because they remember getting help, they feel a responsibility to give help. If that's not a definition of growing up, I don't know what is.

*You talk about advocacy, on your website. Care to elaborate?*

Sure. We'll intercede on a kid's behalf if something's wrong, and it's something we can do something about. We have a young man of Brazilian background who's been very involved with us for two years. He says he wants to be a doctor, and does very well in his math and science courses. Through no fault of his own, he was often late for school, and the school's response was to put an "administrative failure" on his school record. We got the school district to provide him with transportation every morning, and that was the end of the tardiness problem. I don't blame the schools for these kinds of problems. They're overwhelmed. And I'm not blaming the parents, either. Most of our kids live with single parents who work extremely hard just to provide the necessities. Their first language may not be English. Some of our kids have mild physical or behavioral issues. We try to take it in stride.

*Any parting thoughts?*

We have one more goal. It's long term, and maybe beyond the scope of a small program like ours, but we feel it's important. The demographics of this country have changed, and they're going to keep changing. Protecting the mountains, preserving wilderness, is going to take more, in the future, than the current demographic that makes up the AMC and the Sierra Club. We're going to need a much bigger and more inclusive population of Americans who love wild places, and will work to protect them. You're not going to develop love and concern for something you've never seen or experienced because it was beyond your economic or social confines when you were growing up. So we need to make the mountains, the mountain experience, more democratic. J.U.M.P.'s doing that, in its own small way.