

**SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER**[http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/local/232060\\_hiker11.html](http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/local/232060_hiker11.html)**Hiker walks across North America****Massachusetts man ends 7,770-mile trail journey here***Monday, July 11, 2005***By CLAUDIA ROWE**

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

Facing college graduation and the gnawing fact that he had no idea what to do with his life, Andrew Skurka decided to go for a long walk. It covered 7,770 miles, spanned 11 months and forced him to face limits of endurance no entry-level office job ever could.

Yesterday, Skurka completed his epic stroll and became the first person to walk across North America -- from Cape Gaspe, Quebec, to the Olympic Peninsula -- by connecting a network of historic trails.

"The infrastructure was there -- these paths had existed for over 100 years," he said. "But no one had looked at a map of the system to see how you could get yourself all the way across."

Actually, someone had. Ron Strickland, a Seattleite who founded the Pacific Northwest Trail connecting Glacier and Olympic national parks in 1970, came up with the "Sea-to-Sea" route some years ago and Backpacker Magazine wrote about it in 2003. Strickland, 62, was reluctant to attempt the grueling trek himself. But Skurka read the article and was inspired, even obsessed.

Eighteen months later, he was sleeping outside in zero-degree weather, going weeks without taking a shower and spending days in complete silence, never speaking to a soul.

"That was kind of weird," said the hiker from Seekonk, Mass., who turned 24 en route. "I definitely talked to myself, but not out loud unless I was in grizzly country and then I was yelling out every random thought that came into my head."

Skurka was not entirely on his own. While he slept outside most nights, hiking enthusiasts across the country avidly followed his progress on a Web site managed by his mother, Karen, and offered warm beds and hot meals. Still, during last winter's crossing of Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota, the air was so frigid Skurka needed both hands to squeeze his toothpaste from the tube.

Along the route, Skurka's parents watched from afar, fretting if weather maps showed snow when Andrew would be sleeping outside, sending ahead care packages. And their son, the Duke graduate with a double major in economics and political science, dutifully sent home his dirty, wet socks for mom to wash.

"In my generation you were expected to graduate college, start a family and buy a house," said Karen Skurka, a 53-year-old speech therapist in the Fall River, Mass., public schools, who

initially tried to veto her son's unusual plan. "But kids today need to be more creative and sort of pursue their own goals."

Skurka's route took him from the Appalachian to the Pacific Northwest trails, and everywhere he spoke to passers-by about his mission. Well-wishers stunned him with their generosity.

"You get a pretty bad impression of mankind these days," Skurka said. "But what I've found is that people out there are incredibly good. The whole experience has given me much more faith in civilization."

For Strickland, now something of a mentor to the young hiker, Skurka is a long-overdue ambassador to the world that captivated him 30 years ago.

"A lot of hikers are introverts who are out there because they want to get away from everything," he said. "But Andy is really part of an earlier tradition where, if you're deep in the wilderness and you meet another person, you stand there for a while and talk."

Skurka was sponsored by Montrail, which provided footwear; GoLite, which offered essential gear; and Balance Bar.

Saturday afternoon, his parents, Strickland and several dozen beaming hikers were waiting at the Cape Alava beach to greet the trekker before bringing him back to a barbecue and celebration in Port Angeles.

"A lot of people are coming to the party, and a lot of them are crashing there for the night," Skurka said.

"So I might be sleeping outside again."

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