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Appalachian Trail journey: When Maytag said 'take a hike,' he did

Maytag layoff spurs Newton engineer to redirect his career and make dream come true.

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Three years after his job at Maytag was eliminated, Doug Gibson is several steps closer to beginning the next phase of his life.

Five million steps.

The Newton resident, 51, recently finished hiking the Appalachian Trail, a six-month journey from Springer Mountain, Ga., to Mount Katahdin, Maine, that covered 14 states and 2,174 miles.

The trip capped another impressive milestone: Just five years short of when he'd planned to retire, the Maytag engineer went back to Iowa State University and earned a degree in ecology.

Gibson, a West Des Moines native, said he'd always liked the outdoors.

But he played it safe when it came time to pick a major out of high school.

"Most of my aptitude tests were toward engineering and math," he said. "It was kind of my strong suit. Engineers were paid a little more than conservation officers."

This isn't the story, though, of a man who spent his life regretting the road not taken.

Gibson said he enjoyed most of his 23 years at Maytag, where his salary approached six figures.

He and Julie, his wife of 28 years, raised two sons in Newton: Matt, 24, is in graduate school at the University of Iowa working toward a doctorate in computer science, and Ben, 20, is a junior at Truman State University in Kirksville, Mo., studying exercise science.

"I liked my job at Maytag for a long time," Gibson said. "If everything had kept going fine, I probably would have kept working there and retired from there."

But life has a way of ripping people from their comfort zones.

Call to wife: 'I'm free'

The first layoffs came in 2001.

Every year, there were more. It quit being fun to go to work.

"I wanted out," Gibson said. "The fact that I was forced to think,



JUSTIN HAYWORTH/THE REGISTER

Doug Gibson of Newton went through four pairs of hiking boots during his 2,174-mile trek on the Appalachian Trail. He was laid off from Maytag in 2004 and enrolled at Iowa State. He graduated with a degree in ecology in December and set out to hike in February.

Want to hike the Appalachian Trail?

Some advice from the Kathy Bilton, who oversees the Appalachian Trail Home Page, www.fred.net/kathy/at.html.

Q. How long does the hike take?

A. Most people spend between five and seven months on the trail.

Q. When do people generally start?

A. Most start in early April from Springer Mountain. The folks from the Georgia A.T. Club advise beginning no earlier than April 15 because of the potential for severe weather prior to that. Some people choose to go from north to south instead. People choosing this direction generally start in Maine in June.

Q. Does someone need to be an experienced backpacker to hike the trail?

'What do I want to do?' was actually a good opportunity for me. I probably wouldn't have done this, otherwise."

When Gibson heard another round of layoffs was coming, he went to his boss. If you're going to get rid of an electrical engineer, he said, I'd like it to be me.

On Oct. 14, 2004, he was informed at work that his position was eliminated.

"He called me immediately and said, 'I'm free,' " Julie recalled.

Fall 2004 was a time of upheaval for the Gibson family.

Julie's mother was dying. She quit her job as an English as a Second Language teacher to spend more time with her. It was a move she'd been planning to make anyway, she said, she was just a few years ahead of schedule.

Her mother died in November 2004. Julie launched a career, too, as a speaker and workshop leader focusing on spirituality and resiliency.

"We were both kind of at the beginning of the beginning, but we muddled through," she said.

Gibson received six months' severance pay and educational assistance from the North American Free Trade Agreement as a dislocated worker.

He started school full time in January 2005, including summers. By December 2006, he had his degree.

The prudent thing, the safe thing, for a man in Gibson's situation - two years without a real paycheck - would have been to get a job as soon as possible.

But for years, Gibson had had this dream of hiking the Appalachian Trail. He'd planned to do it when he retired at 55 with 30 years of service.

Now, with his career change, he'd be lucky to be done working at age 60.

Savings support dream

Instead of moving back his dream, he thought, why not move it up?

He had the time.

He could dig into savings for the \$4,000 or so the trip would cost.

Gibson began packing his backpack.

"We'd always lived below our means," he said. "We pretty much looked at this as one year out of our retirement."

"The timing was too good to pass up," Julie said.

Gibson said he'd loved hiking since he made his first monthlong backpacking trip to Colorado with a group of friends at 18.

He took time off when his kids were young, but for the past several years he and his brother have spent a week hiking in Colorado every other year.

But he'd never tackled anything like this.

To prepare for the Appalachian Trail, he read many people's online journals.

A. The odds are more favorable if the hiker has a certain amount of experience before attempting the hike.

Q. How much does it cost?

A. While there are no fees involved for hiking the trail, it ends up costing \$2,000-\$4,500. This would include books and maps, transportation to the trailhead, food, occasional lodging, occasional restaurant meals, etc.

Then, of course, hikers will need to have proper equipment.

Q. Are there any special health issues to be thinking about?

A. Yes. Water-borne diseases including giardiasis; tick-borne diseases including Lyme Disease; falls; stress fractures; dehydration.

Recommended reading

- "The Thru-Hiker's Handbook," by Dan Bruce

- "2007 Appalachian Trail Thru-hikers' Companion," by Cindy Miller

- "Walkin' on the Happy Side of Misery: A Slice of Life on the Appalachian Trail," by J.R. Tate

- "A Walk in the Woods: Rediscovering America on the Appalachian Trail," by Bill Bryson.

He made his own stove out of the bottom quarter of a Pepsi can.

He also came up with a trail name - Twofer.

"My brother asked me, 'Who has six months to go hiking?' " Gibson said. "I said mostly people in their 50s and 60s who are retired or between jobs and kids just out of college.

" 'You're in both groups,' he said."

Gibson started on the trail on Feb. 25 and finished Aug. 22.

He averaged 13 miles a day - a distance drivers can travel on a freeway in 12-15 minutes - and went through four pairs of hiking boots.

In the Smokies, temperatures dropped to 10 degrees.

Pennsylvania was rocky.

Vermont, he mostly remembers the rain.

The biggest break he had was in New York, near the 1,400-mile mark, when Julie came out to meet him and they spent several days touring New York City and shopping at Macy's.

Then it was back on the trail.

Treats along the trail

It got tough to keep going around the 1,500 to 1,600 mile mark, Gibson said, but he never really thought of quitting.

At the trailhead in Georgia, an old guy with a long white beard gave him some invaluable advice.

"He said, 'Don't quit on a bad day,' " Gibson said. "Wait until you've had a couple of good days, and then decide."

The people Gibson met along the way kept him going, although some of them he never knew their real names:

- Fellow hikers such as Butch and Sundance, Quiet Paul and Just Rick, PaPa and Many Names.
- "Trail angels" who dropped off Snickers bars, Mountain Dew and Miller along the trail for hikers to find.
- A group of day-hiking teenagers in New Hampshire who stood on the trail and applauded him when they found out how far he had come.

With Julie's help, Gibson kept an online journal. .

In his six months on the trail, Gibson had more than 100,000 page hits. A couple in Connecticut read the journal and sent an e-mail.

"They said when you get here, we'd like to put you up a night and put you up for food," he said. "I took them up on it."

Some people claim the miles of solitude on the trail lead to self-discovery. Gibson said he didn't really find out anything about himself he didn't already know.

He did gain new insight into the character of the world around him, though.

"I learned there are a lot of good people out there," he said.

Cholesterol, weight drop

His body never betrayed him, Gibson said, except for a few blisters and a toenail that fell off after he left the trail.

His cholesterol, a little on the high side at the beginning of the trip, fell from 227 to 192, and he lost 20 pounds.

Julie said the trip changed her husband in other ways, too.

"When you chart your own path, what you get is more confidence in yourself," she said. "When I went out to visit him, he was more likely to go up to people and initiate a conversation. But he's still a pretty modest guy."

Gibson said he knew he'd be taking a pay cut when he decided to go back to school and major in ecology. His time on the trail just reinforced that he'd made the right decision.

Of the things he missed most when he was miles from home, he learned what he valued the most.

"Family and friends," he said.

Then, Gibson pointed across the dining room table at Julie.

"Her," he said, his face turning pink.

Next up on Gibson's agenda is to start looking for work. He's hoping to find a job with the Department of Natural Resources or in county conservation.

For the man who's already taken 5 million steps, the journey is just beginning.

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