

# **My American Challenge 2015**

*By Lauren Springham*

In September this year I was given the opportunity to participate in a trip to America, to complete the American Challenge 2015. This was a three week adventure over to America where we had to complete a hike through The Great Smokey Mountains, volunteering with trail maintenance work and also visiting boys and girls club over there. It was organised by Essex Boys and Girls Club, which I am a leader within one of these many clubs in Essex. Myself and seven other volunteers completed these three weeks. Towards this trip we had to raise £700, and it was amazing how much people were donating, this really did motivate me to complete this trip. By the end of these three weeks we were awarded with a John Muir explorer award and an amazing experience to remember.

This trip was honestly the most amazing three weeks I have ever had. It was hard however after the whole three weeks it felt so rewarding. During the first week we were set the mission to complete the hike of The Great Smokey Mountains. This was the part which I was most worried about. I knew I was the weakest one within the group, however I was so determined to finish no matter how long it would take or how much it was hurt. We all got a trial partner within the group and a name. I had Callum (best partner), he was so encouraging and supportive, and every time I was struggling at the back he would come and keep my company and stay with me right until the end, which made it a little easier. My trail name was 'The Dark Tortoise' this was due to me being slow however proving that I was still up there with the good ones. The first day was honestly was exhausting day of the whole week. We attacked this mountain like there was no tomorrow. After the first 30 minutes, I honestly thought I would not be able to complete the rest of the week. Although I just kept thinking of everyone that had sponsored me and I knew I could not let them down or myself. Finally we arrived at our first shelter for the night, I just cried. I was happy I had done that day but did not know what was going to come around the corner the next day. BUT I did see a black bear!! This was pretty amazing to see one on the first day!!? Also Graham did say he was proud of me which was a massive compliment, especially from Graham!! The shelters were cosy, they were just somewhere to sleep and trust me after a day of hiking miles between 7-15 miles each day you could not care where you slept.

As the days went on it started to get easier, we started to find our 'trail legs' and just walk without even thinking at all. We was working so well together and got each other through it and by the middle of the week we was covering so much distance in small amounts of time! One of my favourite parts of the walking week was when we went to do our independent walking. I absolutely loved this part, when we just wandered off one by one with 10 minutes

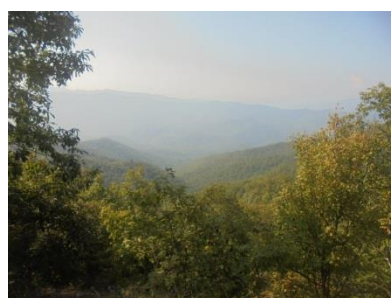
sections, and you was just walking at your own pace. It was so peaceful when you was on your own, just felt so surreal what we was actually doing.

Using a privy was an experience. I am not going to go into detail but I don't want to use one of them again for a while. Also I was craving home food which was annoying but I had my yummy pasta and tuna! By this point of the trip, none of us cared if we smelt or looked like. We just wanted to finish.



We had completed The Great Smokey Mountains a massive 72miles, with ups and downs in just only six days. I couldn't actually believe we had finished it! It just hit me, I was so emotional but ecstatic!!! No more runny porridge!!! The smile on my face was massive, I was so proud of myself and everyone for completing it. Graham came round and shook everyone's hands and I was just dancing away. I would not have been able to complete it if it was not for the people I was with. Each one of them Callum, Ellie, Amber, Luke, Simon, Juliet and of course Graham! I owe these guys so much!! I loved the last few days if I am being honest even with all the different emotions!!!

The Great Smokey Mountains is honestly stunning. The views we got to see were a dream. Totally breathe taking!!! I would say I would love to see them again but I don't fancy hiking up any of them hills any time soon....





When we finished we were picked up by Bobby and went straight off to the base camp of Rocky Top Trail Crew. We had two days to rest and finally we got to have a shower!!!! I felt human again and everyone smelt a lot better! We waited for the rest of the volunteers for this week. There were a lot of us, it was all us lot then Bobby, Davis, Logan, Jan and Constantin. I had a rough idea of what we were doing this week compared to the previous week. We made our way up another hill and reached camp and we continued with the week.

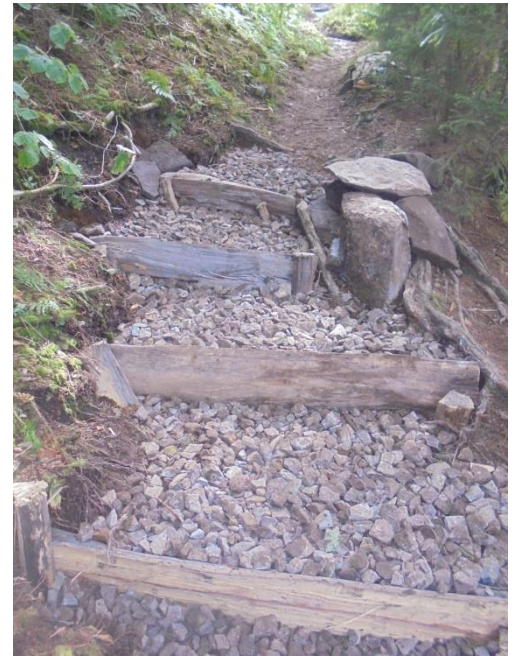
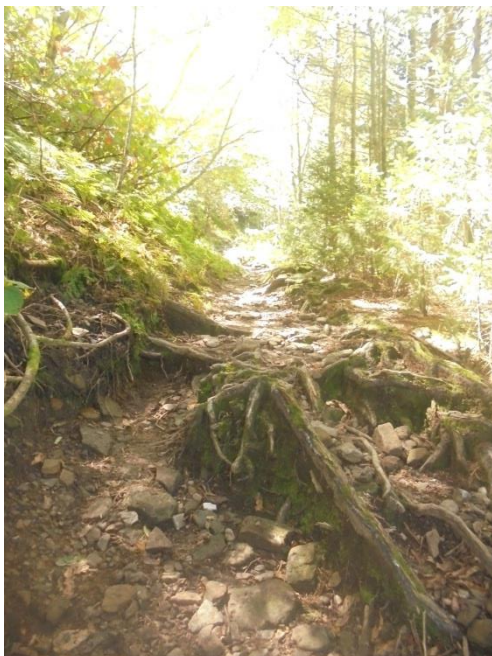
Working with Rocky Top Trail Crew was an incredible experience. I absolutely loved it. Everyone got a long really well and we all worked together as a team. We got so much done within that one week!! We broke the record for the amount of work ever to be completed within a week.

This week was like a mini work out. Smashing, breaking and crushing rocks to build different things to help hikers who passed. I was not very good at the measurements before we made our creations. However I was pretty good at crushing rocks, making medium size rocks into tiny little rocks also known as 'crush'. Davis named me as 'the crush master' which was pretty cool. I was just floating between groups making crush for everyone. In a way it was very therapeutic, something was rather satisfying about hitting rocks with hammers.

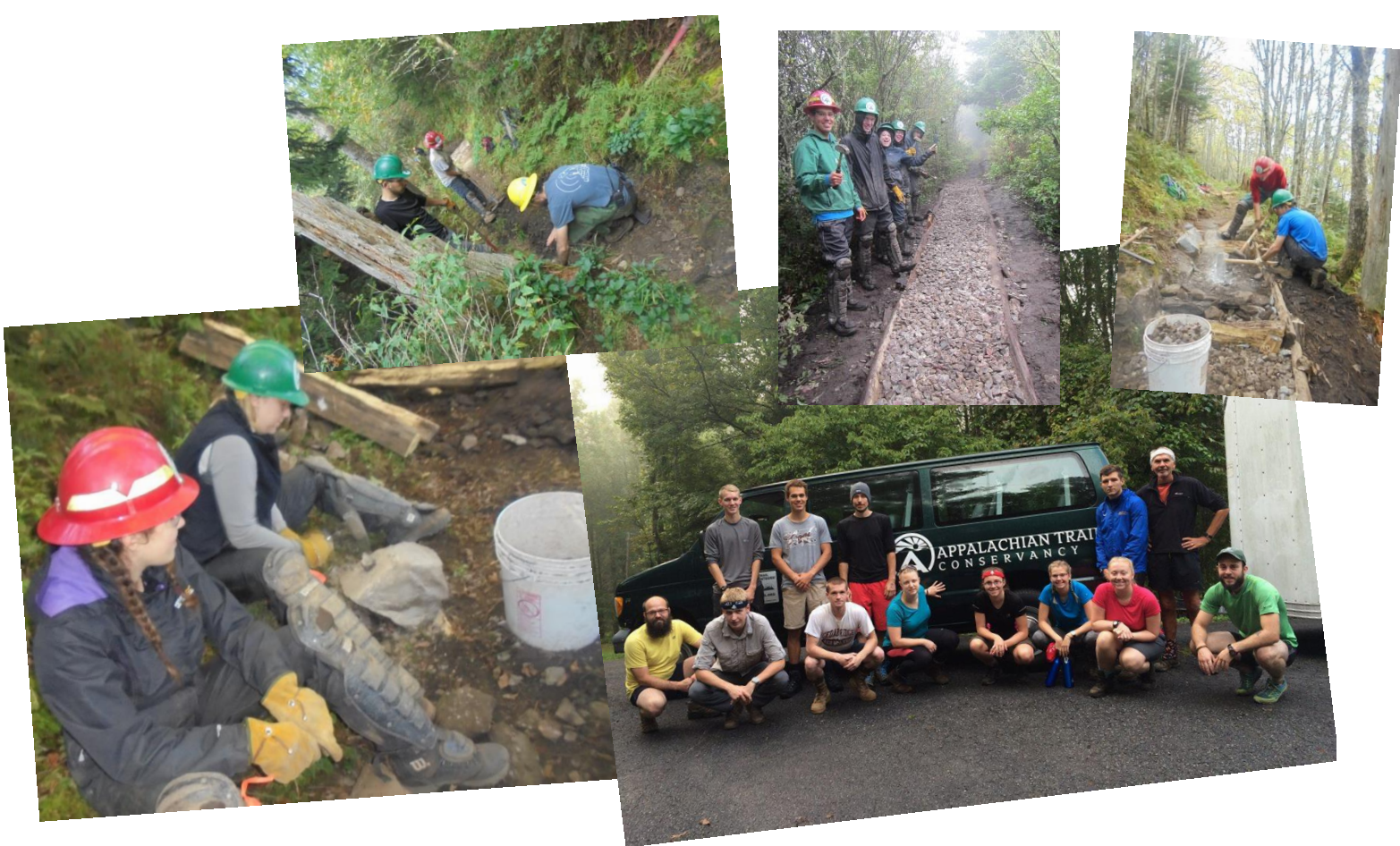
The difference between the nature and what we made was remarkable and the best part about it was how appreciative the hikers who passed by. Honestly they were so grateful which just motivated you to do more and get more work done.

When we were up in base camp we took it in turn to cook and clean. Also played the most amazing game ever – wolf!! Every night we would play this card game and it was the best game!! After the game each night you would be too tired to stay up and just wanted to sleep. However it was pretty cold – although us girls had a solution, we zipped all of our sleeping bags together which was a mission in itself!

That week absolutely flew by!!! I didn't actually want to leave I was enjoying myself up there a little too much. I would defiantly volunteer to help out with a trail crew again!!!







The final part of our American trip was more chilled out compared to the last two weeks. This was the part where we went to visit boys and girls clubs over in the USA. I was really looking forward to this part, especially coming from a boys and girls club I wanted to see what it was like.

It was completely different to my club back home! But I honestly had so much fun! I loved it!! The kids were amazed to see people from England, although some of them thought England was another planet... All the clubs we went to were different and so different to my clubs. Different in the way that the children come straight from school (we got to ride on a yellow school bus!!!!), get fed and then don't leave until late. Also where the clubs would either be an old school or an old building, they were massive compared to our tiny hall on a Tuesday night with roughly 35 children for an hour. The children were so happy that we were there actually so did the helpers. They were so interested in what we were here for and what we had done. We taught one club leaders how to play cricket and they were pretty good at it and think and hope they are going to continue and teach it to the children!!

It was a phenomenal experience and I absolutely loved it all!!! Words cannot describe what it was like visiting them and joining in on all the activities that they do; basketball, one ball, colouring, homework, pool and loads more activities. Each club was different with different rules and games. I couldn't pick a favourite club they were all honestly amazing!!! Would love to do this week again!!! We also visited a food bank where the clubs got their food from which was so interesting!! And we had to present a power point to a highschool,

which went well and it followed by questions like: 'do you live in a castle?' 'Have we met the Queen?' 'Whats the weather like in England?'.

Another fun, chilled out part was when we visited DOLLYWOOD!!! We got discounted tickets from Bruce which was very nice of him!! That was a fun day, it was like a massive reward after all the weeks of hard work which we had done. It was such a good day to just chill out!!! And how can I forget Pancake Pantry!!! Which was rather sickly but so yummy!



Overall this experience has been mind-blowing. I cannot put into words how astounding, beautiful and brilliant the three weeks were. I know I have said that I have loved each week of the three weeks but I could not pick my favourite moment. With all of it combined it was the best time ever. If I could do it all again I would not hesitate at all. I would be on that plane as soon as possible.

I would strongly recommend this trip to anyone, even though I was not sure about going at first. However I thought that I need to challenge myself so I decided to give it a go. And I am so happy I did. I would have regretted not going after experiencing this incredible trip.

I would like to just like to say a massive thank you to Essex Boys and Girls Club for allowing me to have this experience, I cannot thank them enough. Thank you to everyone who kindly donated money toward me actually making this trip happen. Also thank you to Juliet Townsend, Graham Brandwood, Callum Alexander, Amber Amey, Ellie Clarke, Luke Doell, Simon Holt and all the amazing people in America!!!!

This experience has also made me realise how much my club means to me. I have been at Linford Wanders Club since I was seven years old and now I am a leader at 19 years old and it will continue.



