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Warrior Hikers Share a Meal and Stories With Students

Three north bound thru-hikers who are part of the Warrior Hike "Walk Off The War" Program shared their stories with students from the Rangeley Lakes Regional School when the kids hosted a barbecue for the hikers on the shore of Haley Pond over Labor Day Weekend.

The students, members of the Rangeley Lakes Regional School Outing Club, learned lessons about life, both on and off the Appalachian Trail.

Comparing the Warrior Hike "Walk Off The War" program to Wounded Warriors,

one of the hikers, trail name Jabba, explained that the Wounded Warrior Project focuses on veterans with physical injuries while the Warrior Hike is geared to veterans with mental scars – memories and experience less obvious, but still often significant.

The Warrior Hikers left Springer Mountain in Georgia on March 17th and had hiked 1,958 miles by the time they met up with the RLRS Outing Club for the barbecue on August 30th.

Their goal? The summit of Mt. Katahdin, 220 miles away, which they intend to

reach in two weeks.

With the end in sight, the hikers will need to hike an average of 16 miles a day, every day, with 25 to 40 pounds in gear on their backs.

Stephanie Cutts, AKA "Rosie," was a hull maintenance technician for six years with the United States Navy. She shared World War II's "Rosie the Riveter" stories with the students, thus explaining the inspiration behind her trail name.

Rosie shared how walking clears the head. "If you're worried, stressed, or frustrated at the start of the day, you won't be at the end of a day of hiking. And if you're having a good day, you'll still be having a good day when you're on the trail."

Thomas Gathman explained that his trail name, "Jabba," reflects his great appetite on the trail – think "Jabba, the Hutt."

While having expected to end his hike looking like the Star Wars Jabba, he's actually lost 50 pounds during his time on the trail.

As trail names are often chosen to reflect a hiker's personality, significant event, or personal preference, it is not surprising that "Rob," a veteran of 32 years in the United States Army, who said he was called everything from "Private" to "Sergeant Major" with some more colorful monikers on occasion, chose simply, his name having rarely heard it during his



Hikers are pictured speaking to members of the Rangeley Lakes Regional School Outing Club.

military career.

Robert Carmel explained that his time on the trail is helping him to transition from his military career to life as a civilian.

Gathered round a campfire after dinner, Jabba shared stories of the challenges that come from military deployment and the subsequent transition back to civilian life.

Current Warrior Hikers, he said, are following in the footsteps of Earl Shaffer, a World War II veteran who "walked off the war." He was the first person to thru-hike the AT in 1948.

Realizing that it's important that each hiker "hike their own hike" Rob and Jabba have both been willing to do extra miles when necessary. Earlier in his hike Rob added extra miles so that he could get 300

miles ahead of his fellow hikers, leave the trail to go to his daughter's wedding in Texas, and then return to the trail, determined to "not miss a single blaze."

Jabba adjusted his miles the day after the barbecue to allow him the opportunity to catch the opening Penn State versus Syracuse football game in Rangeley Saturday afternoon.

Determined to still "make miles," Jabba summited Saddleback in the morning, then hiked down the ski slope, and caught a ride to town to cheer Penn State to victory. He expected that his joy over the win would carry him the extra miles the next day.

The remaining Warrior Hiker, "Mama Goose," Sharon Smith, who served seven years as a medic with

the United States Air Force and Reserves missed the barbecue but was able to catch up with the hikers in Rangeley and is determined, as they all are, to celebrate the journey of a lifetime atop Katahdin.

And so it was that the combination of great food provided by the students, a beautiful setting provided by Ecopelagicon, clean hikers courtesy of the Rangeley Region Health and Wellness Partnership, and clean clothes courtesy of John Towey and the Village Scrub Board, created a unique opportunity for sharing stories and learning one Friday night.

The Rangeley Lakes Regional School Outing club wishes the Warrior Hikers safe steps and clear skies and thanks them for their service. ■

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