

# Go Trailfest! Get outside!

Trailfest 2013 called on residents, visitors, and of course Appalachian Trail hikers to come out to downtown Hot Springs April 19-21 and celebrate the outdoors.

Hosted by the Hot Springs Community Learning Center, the annual three-day festival celebrated all things outdoors from biking, skateboarding and rafting to even hula-hooping and music.

All proceeds for the event went towards helping families participate in community services such as transitional kindergarten, after-school programs, out-of-school care and summer camps.



PHOTOS BY MELISSA DEAN/THE NEWS-RECORD & SENTINEL



## Hiking to Heal

Warrior Hike "Walk off the War"

By Melissa Dean  
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They come from different backgrounds, different walks of life and each with different reasons for coming to the mountains of Appalachia.

But what they do share are stories of heroism and moments which have defined their lives, some have come to reflect, some to forget.

No matter what the reason, they all have one similar goal: to walk off the war.

"I was really lost because I had been through so much—I didn't know where I was going," said Dick Erwin, 34, who was nicknamed by fellow hikers "The Patriot" because he hikes with an American flag.

Erwin, a cryogenic technician in the marine for nine years, joined over a dozen other veterans to hike the Appalachian Trail in a program called Warrior Hike "Walk off the War."

The program was started in 2011 by Marine Corps captains Mark Silvers and Sean Gobin who founded a nonprofit called Warrior Hike.

In 2012, the duo hiked all 2185 miles of the Appalachian Trail to raise \$50,000 in donations for seriously wounded veterans from the war in Afghanistan.

Recognizing the physical and spiritual benefits of hiking the Appalachian Trail, Warrior Hike partnered with the Appalachian Trail Conservancy to create the Walk off the War Program.

The program is designed to support wounded veterans transitioning from military service by hiking the Appalachian Trail.

"These mountains help you in a lot of ways," said Stephanie Cutts, Navy. "There is always so much regret because you miss a lot (when you're deployed)."

Cutts lost her father while deployed and was

unable to come back to the states for the funeral.

"I have definitely had a lot of internal debates and what ifs in my own personal life but I can feel myself getting stronger—my head clearing," she said.

This year marks the first group hike with 13 vets from the US Marines, Navy, Air Force and Army.

The group was honored last weekend by residents and the town of Hot Springs at the annual Trailfest as they made their way through the peaks and valleys of Western North Carolina.

"The support from communities has been overwhelming," said Cutts. "Everyone is thanking us, but really it is the other way around."

And while they are just touching the surface of the hike, with over 1,900 miles to go before completion, many say can already feel some of the benefits the Appalachian Mountains encompass.



"This is why we are here," Cutts said she told one of her fellow hikers when she first saw the

stunning view from Max Patch. "This is why we are here—To see this and to get better."

The team will continue the trek north and hope to complete the entire trail by September.

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