

A special journey on the John Muir Trail

By: Ron Erskine
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The John Muir Trail is surely the most famous and the most beautiful wilderness path in the lower 48 states. Beginning at an elevation of 4,000 feet in Yosemite Valley, the trail follows the crest of the Sierra Nevada for 221 miles over eleven mountain passes to the summit of Mt. Whitney, at 14,495 feet, the highest point in the United States outside of Alaska.

Long time Morgan Hill resident, Joanne Rife, is hiking the John Muir Trail. Along with her son, Dan Rife, they have divided the trail into four sections, and they are doing one section a year for four consecutive years. Joanne, Dan, and Joanne's son-in-law, Steve Kreidler, recently returned from completing section three, a 13-day 70-mile trip that included four mountain passes of approximately 12,000 feet. Next August, Joanne will cross the final two passes – both over 13,000 feet – and reach her final destination, the summit of 14,495-foot Mt. Whitney.

When she does, she will be 82 years old.

Stop, take a few moments, and think about that. Consider the hardships Joanne endures daily on the trail: no bathroom, marginal food, sleeping on the ground, bugs, meager protection from rain, hail and cold, just to name a few. Don't forget that these privations are part and parcel of the main event: walking rugged trails all day, every day at high altitude with all your equipment strapped to your back.

At such a prospect, most people, even eager 20-something's hungering for adventure, will say, "Thanks, but no thanks."

When I met with Joanne, she continually tried to deflect any credit or praise. Instead, she points to her son, Dan, and other family members – her Sherpas she calls them – who carry extra pounds that lighten her load to 25 pounds. And they deserve tremendous credit, but they are supporting an irrepressible spirit. At 60, along with her husband, she bicycled across the United States. At 70, rather than give her a "thing" as a birthday present, Dan challenged her to prepare for an "experience" – a trip to the top of Half Dome in Yosemite. For her 75th, the top of Mt. Whitney. For 80, a four-year 221-mile wilderness adventure of a lifetime.

Joanne cited her good fortune – three things that have allowed her to enjoy the adventures in her life. She is healthy, she has a special and supportive family, and most importantly, she loves it. For Joanne, the physical challenge and deprivations don't begin to outweigh the gifts of the journey. She talked about the satisfaction of taking on and completing a physically challenging and difficult adventure. She remarked how wilderness



Dan and Joanne Rife take in the view from the top of Mt. Whitney in September, 2008

travel placed her squarely in the present moment. “Next week” has no meaning. Your mind is preoccupied with comfort, food, and shelter moment to moment.

The final thing Joanne mentioned that she loved about her extraordinary wilderness trip is the very thing she is the best example of: the people you meet there. The morning paper and the six o’clock news can lead one to despair about the kind of creatures we are. That is, until you sit at a backcountry creek crossing sharing trail mix and conversation with someone like Joanne. Encounters like this transform one’s perception of our species from depraved to divine.

Make a note. One morning next August, Joanne Rife will shoulder her load, and alone with her thoughts, rise step-by-agonizing step up the rounded back of Mt. Whitney. Even at 82, she won’t need our help, but if you remember, send her a positive thought – a psychic boost to the top.