Big Cypress
Volunteer Work Party

Coming Soon:
GAP CLOSURE
Closing Roadwalk in
Orange & Osceola County

A New
Beginning
Setting Goals
for the Future

Hike Like
A Woman
Online Group
Goes Outdoors

Florida Trail
Association
Northeastern University students clearing a wet section of trail in the Bradwell Bay Wilderness.
Our Mission
The Florida Trail Association (FTA) develops, maintains, protects and promotes a network of hiking trails throughout the state, including the unique Florida National Scenic Trail (commonly known as the Florida Trail). Together with our partners we provide opportunities for the public to hike, engage in outdoor recreation, participate in environmental education and contribute to meaningful volunteer work.

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Cover photo: Enjoying the scenery on the hike back from a day of trail work north of 13 Mile Camp in Big Cypress.
OUR MAGAZINE
The Footprint is published by the Florida Trail Association, a volunteer-based nonprofit organization focused on Florida hiking and trail building. Since 1966, the primary mission of our organization has been the care and protection of the Florida Trail, a 1,300-mile footpath across the Sunshine State - Florida's own National Scenic Trail.

OUR GOAL
To provide outreach to our readers through informative articles that express appreciation for and conservation of the natural beauty of Florida; to inform our readers of Florida Trail Association business; and to provide information on Florida hiking and outdoor recreation opportunities.

CONTRIBUTORS
Contributors are welcome to submit items for our various departments as well as trail and association-related news. Please contact the editor at communications@floridatrail.org to discuss ideas for feature stories prior to submission.

MEMBERSHIP
If you're not already a member, join now. As a Florida Trail member, you receive a subscription to The Footprint magazine, membership in a local chapter, a local newsletter with local activities, opportunities for outdoor skills training, participation in regional and annual conferences and more. Call toll-free 877-HIKE-FLA for more information.

ADVERTISING
Reach a highly targeted demographic of Florida outdoor enthusiasts by advertising with us or becoming a regular sponsor. Your advertising dollars directly support production and publication of this magazine and assist the Florida Trail Association in fulfilling its mission. Call 877-HIKE-FLA or email fta@FloridaTrail.org for more details.

Deadline for articles for the Spring/Summer issue of The Footprint is June 21, 2018.
Dear FTA Members,

We had a productive Annual Meeting/Chapter Council/Open House/Board weekend! Many thanks to Jan Wells, Judy Trotta, and Lauren Krebs for helping me host the celebration at the new office. It was quite a spread, and a good time was had by all. Special thanks to new Trailblazer Chair, Jeff Hampton, for providing the champagne and a toast to our FTA future.

At the Annual Meeting, I highlighted some of the work the Board has accomplished this past year. Administration of a corporation is not as instantly rewarding as blazing the Florida Trail, but just as important. The work can be tedious at times, but we also have fun. I am so grateful for the dedication of our Directors. Here’s a short list of our major accomplishments:

— Joined Florida Conservation Voters
— Approved major reroutes for the Big Bend and Orange/Osceola regions
— Voted to use electronic voting starting in 2019 to facilitate statewide participation
— Strengthened Directors’ Giving policy to ensure we have 100% Board participation
— Moved the FTA office!

We also traveled quite a bit this year. At least 1 person from the Board was at the following events:

- Florida Wildlife Corridor Symposium, June Greenways and Trails meeting, FT Coalition meetings, FWC tour of the Big Bend reroute, ribbon cutting events at Split Oak and Micco Bluff, FWC 50th anniversary at Tosohatchee, Ididahike, FTA hosted Wild & Scenic Film Festival, Hike the Hill, and the Outdoor Retailers show. None of the travel expenses are reimbursed by FTA, so I’m grateful for lower gas prices these days. It’s been fun for me to see new parts of Florida and meet more volunteers. I can tell you that we’re all the same – we are passionate about the Florida Trail!

A couple of notes from the Board meeting:

- The Board is moving methodically to develop a plan on what to do about a more permanent office. Our first step is to demolish the old building on Hwy 441. We need to analyze our options regarding the property. We could elect to rebuild on the property, build at a new address, or lease. All ideas now are on the table, and we are in fact-finding mode. Hence, we are not going to embark on a “capital campaign” until we know what we want. This much we do know: the next FTA office will be one of which we can be proud.

- Janet tells me that the E-Blaze is not getting read; it only has a 33% open rate. This is a friendly reminder that this is one of the primary means of communication for us. If you are not getting it, please email communications@floridatrail.org to let us know.

- Plans are underway for our Fall Conference on October 5 – 7, in Deland at the Wayne G. Sanborn Activity Center. This year, the theme will celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the National Scenic Trails Act. The conference is our primary outreach to new members and the public and is not intended to replace the camaraderie of the regional conference. The Southern conference is already scheduled for the first weekend in December, and I hope to hear more of it soon.

Leslie Wheeler
FTA President

New Beginnings
Taking stock of the past, setting goals for the future.
I’d like to remind our members of the Land Acquisition Fund, for the purchase of land to close gaps in the Florida Trail. These monies are used only for this purpose. Right now, we have less than $20k available. We want to help the USFS to close the gaps on the Florida Trail. The USFS keeps a list of parcels they want to buy, but there are always unexpected opportunities. Our cash could provide a binder to a willing seller while the USFS works with other partners to secure the remaining purchase price. To be clear, FTA is not in business of owning land, and we would not become the owner. However, since I’m asking you to hold your donations toward the Building Fund for now, this is another very worthy need for the future of the Florida Trail.

Kelly Wiener, the Central/South Regional Representative, needs a new truck. After already investing thousands of dollars in repairs into the old FTA “Blaze Mobile” (famous for its blaze orange color)... Alas, the 2003 Nissan Xterra is on its last leg and has proven to be unsuitable for pulling our FTA trailers. Not to mention, Kelly has been driving around South Florida without any A/C! If you have a 4-wheel drive truck in good working condition that you would like to donate, OR if you have a connection with a car dealership, please contact me or Janet Akerson ASAP. It’s the responsibility of FTA to provide vehicles for the trail team.

Welcome to our new Directors! Ralph Hancock from the Tampa area is a long-time member and was a successful businessman during his career. Deborah Schroth, from Jacksonville, is a lawyer with legislative experience. Their talents will be a great addition to our Board.

Thank you Chapter Council, under the leadership of Howard Pardue, for your work on strengthening the chapters and now accepting the task of revising chapter procedures. Again, maybe not the most exciting work, but your efforts will help ensure the vitality of FTA for years to come.

Well, I could keep writing about what’s happening at FTA and it could end up as long as the FT itself! Thanks again for all you each do for FTA and the Florida Trail. We are closing the gaps, we are getting new members (just need to get them to renew), and we are moving forward step by step.

Thanks,

Leslie Wheeler
Granite Gear Grounds Keepers are cleaning up the FNST!

Over 50 pounds of trash have been removed by thru-hikers to date!

Learn more at TheGroundsKeepers.org
ANDREW JACKSON

“After a fatiguing, tedious and circuitous march of twelve days, misled by the ignorance of our pilots and exposed to the severest of privations, we finally reached and effected a passage over the Escambia.” – General Andrew Jackson to John C. Calhoun, Secretary of War, June 2, 1818.

This march on Pensacola was by an army of approximately 1200 men and wagons across West Florida during the final stages of the First Seminole War in Florida. Jackson’s purpose was to chastise Spain for allegedly harboring renegade American Indians and for seizing an American supply vessel. The American army eventually occupied Spanish-controlled Pensacola and precipitated the ceding of Florida to the U.S.

LOWER CREEK TRADING PATH

After camping (estimated on May 18, 1818) at Lake Jackson near Florala, Alabama, Jackson’s army found a trail, as described by Joseph Purcell: The Path between Mount Pleasant [Florida town] and the Fork of the Lower Creek Trading Path is plain and well trod,…” Map of the Road from Pensacola in West Florida and St. Augustine in East Florida, 1778.

Jackson’s troops were not the first army to tread on the path. In 1778 a small detachment of British soldiers marched from Pensacola to aid besieged St. Augustine during the American Revolution. Along the way, they were joined by Seminole and Creek warriors. Also accompanying them was the cartographer, Joseph Purcell, who produced the only definitive map of the Old Spanish Trail. After Jackson’s march down the western section of this trail, it became known as the Jackson Trail.

BLACKWATER RIVER STATE FOREST

Around May 19 or 20, 1818, Jackson’s army marched into what later became the largest State-owned forest in Florida, the Blackwater River State Forest. Located in Okaloosa and Santa Rosa Counties and established in 1939, it holds, along with Alabama’s Conecuh National Forest, the largest contiguous longleaf pine/wiregrass communities in the nation. The colorful pitcher plants are interspersed here – all five varieties.

BICENTENNIAL ANNIVERSARY OF ANDREW JACKSON’S MARCH DOWN THE JACKSON TRAIL

Have you ever hiked a Native American trading path? Or the Old Spanish Trail? Or General Jackson’s Trail? Or in the footsteps of a Revolutionary band of soldiers? Well there is a part of the Florida Trail that is at least 230 years old and embodies all of the above! An impending event and anniversary will soon recognize its history and its value as a recreational asset.
“Trod by Indians, Redcoats, and Volunteers, now on the ridge, the lovely pitcher plant rears. Overlooking the path Andy Jackson came down to the weary Spaniards at Pensacola town.” The trumpet-leaf Pitcher Plant, Sarracenia flava, is carnivorous and lures, traps and digests insects. Jackson Trail, Blackwater River State Forest, May 9, 2013.

There were three major waterways in the Forest that the traveler would encounter on Jackson’s Trail. Traveling south, first, would be Panther Creek. Next would be the Blackwater River, one of the few shifting sand bottom streams which remains in its natural state. The Creeks called it Futeechattelagga (Red Clay Creek). At the west boundary of the Forest, the old trail crossed Juniper Creek, known to the Creeks as Tallahatchee (Palmetto Creek). Both Juniper and Blackwater are kayak waterways.

FLORIDA TRAIL-JACKSON TRAIL
In 1970, this historic trail received some recognition by the creation of a hiking trail by forest rangers. Approximately 20 miles of trail from the Panther Creek-High Bridge Road intersection in the north to the Big Juniper Creek-Red Rock Road intersection in the south roughly follows the old footprint. It is maintained by the Western Gate Chapter of the Florida Trail Association. In 1983, it became part of the Florida National Scenic Trail.

The Panhandle Chapter of the Florida Trail Association will host guest speaker, Bob Hurst, who will present a program on the Bicentennial Anniversary of Andrew Jackson’s March Down the Jackson Trail in Blackwater River State Forest. The event will take place at 6:30 p.m. Monday, May 7 at the Science and Discovery Center, 308 Airport Road, Panama City, FL. For further info, contact panhandlefita@gmail.com.

On Saturday, May 19, the Western Gate Chapter of the Florida Trail Association will hold a 10-mile hike down the Jackson Trail in Blackwater River State Forest to commemorate Jackson’s army’s march down the trail in May 1818. There will be 3 bailout points. Meetup is at Bear Lake Recreation Area at 8:30 a.m. A shuttle will take the hikers to Red Rock Road, where the hike will begin. For further info, contact Helen Wigersma, hwigersma@gmail.com.

END OF THE TRAIL
The Indian Removal Act of 1830 sounded the death knoll for the old trading path. Trade with the Creeks ceased and improved roads shortened the distances between the newly created settlements of the colonists. Thanks to the Florida Trail Association, the old trail has come to life once again. A recreational trail has been created as well as a portion of history preserved, a win for both eco- and heritage tourism.
Breathe Easy

Right now, wherever you are, take a long and deep breath through both your mouth and nose, and hold it in for a few seconds longer than you need to. Does it burn, smell bad, or give you a headache? If not then I am happy for you and your clean air. If the answer was yes, then please go step outside or into a better place. Our FTA staff used to feel the sensation of poor air quality, but no more! After extensive testing showed the health of the office near Paynes Prairie to be horrendous because of high mold levels, it was a very simple and quick decision to cut ties with the old “little house on the prairie,” and seek healthier, mold-free accommodations that more closely match the current needs of the organization.

Aside from clean air, we were looking to downsize and have a space for trail equipment. Thankfully, a perfect location was found, and a new chapter is being written into FTA history. Our new space is located close to downtown Gainesville, on a quiet side street alongside a paved bike path. It has big windows for lots of natural light and a layout that is not going to get anyone lost, like the old office often did. The attached warehouse is a tool lover’s (like me) delight, with lots of space for projects and storage. I can even back my trailer inside if needed!

The FTA office cat, Penny, even has a new cat tower!

Our Gainesville staff could not be happier with the new office and we look forward to settling in here for the next three years, when our lease runs out. The Board of Directors has formed a committee to decide the fate of the old office and land, but there is fortunately time to make good, thoughtful decisions. Come on by for an in person tour sometime! Penny will be happy to show you around.

Florida Trail Association

FloridaTrail.org
As our busy field season comes to an end, FTA volunteers are putting the finishing touches on trail projects throughout the Panhandle Region. New gates have been installed to restore access to a section of Florida Trail in Weaver Creek on Eglin Air Force Base, the Choctawhatchee Chapter continues to work with Framing Our Communities to complete an impressive suspension bridge across Alaqua Creek, and we’ve hosted several successful volunteer work parties to maintain trail and respond to storm damage along the Choctawhatchee River Section and Econfina Creek. Feedback from hikers in our region has been positive, the trail is in great shape, and we continue to recruit new volunteer trail maintainers. Thank you to all our volunteers for their hard work!

In addition to the regular maintenance events scheduled by our FTA Chapter volunteers, the Florida Trail Association has been working with several universities to host service-oriented Alternative Spring Break programs here in the Panhandle. These programs allow college students to engage in meaningful volunteer work while enjoying the spectacular natural beauty found along the Florida Trail. Many of these students come from urban areas and have little background with hiking, backpacking, or trail maintenance; performing trail work in Florida’s woods and swamps can be an eye-opening experience that pushes them significantly out of their comfort zones. They’ve proven to be up to the challenge, and they’ve made a significant contribution to trail conditions over the last few months.

One of our more established spring break partnerships has been with the University of Florida’s Alternative Breaks Program. For several years now FAB has been sending UF students up to the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge for a spring weekend of trail work. Thanks to the multi-year efforts of this group, we’ve been able to clear, blaze orange, and officially reopen the Swamp Hammock trail in eastern St. Marks, bringing the Florida Trail route back onto this stunning section of footpath. We marked the event with a dedication
and ribbon-cutting ceremony following this year’s work weekend, and the FAB program committed to adopting this section of trail and maintaining it in future years.

The FTA has also partnered with university groups from further afield. The American Hiking Society helped to organize a group of Northeastern University students for a volunteer vacation in the Florida Panhandle; ten students enjoyed a temporary reprieve from the fierce winter weather of New England while hiking and working within the Apalachicola National Forest. The group helped to establish several minor reroutes to mitigate erosion along the Sopchoppy River, as well as clearing the entirety of the Bradwell Bay swamp and adjoining wilderness areas. Finally, a group from Georgia Southern University closed out our field season by doing several days of work in the western portion of St. Marks near Purify Bay Road and along US 98. This group repaired several small bridges along the FT and maintained some of the iconic coastal marshland sections of trail for which St. Marks is famous.

It’s inspiring to see these young people volunteer their time and energy towards the hard work of maintaining the Florida Trail. College students have plenty of choices when it comes to spring break activities, and we’re proud that they choose to spend it by working with us and learning about a lesser-known side of Florida. These types of opportunities help to plant a seed for future environmental stewardship, and I like to think that we’ve gained advocates for Florida’s wild places and the footpaths that run through them. With this in mind, we’re looking forward to growing the Alternative Breaks Program partnership over the coming years; interested students, professors, or administrators can always reach out to me at adamf@floridatrail.org to start a conversation on how we can work together on FNST service projects.

GSU students enjoyed sunny skies and pleasant temperatures throughout their week of trail work in St. Marks.

Spirits were high after a long day of trudging through swamps and hacking back titi thickets.

UF students from the Florida Alternative Break Program pose at the ribbon-cutting ceremony marking the reopening of the Swamp Hammock section of Florida Trail in St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge.
The landscape of St. Marks makes for an exotic backdrop as students from all over the country experience the Florida Trail.
Removing Roadwalk
by Kelly Wiener, Central/South Regional Representative

Deseret Ranch is a 300,000-acre cattle operation owned by the Mormon Church that crosses Brevard, Orange and Osceola counties in Central Florida. Historically, the Florida Trail passed through the Deseret Ranch property along Levee L73. After long deliberation, Deseret leadership decided to discontinue their public access agreement. The trail segment was closed in 2003, leaving thru-hikers with the 31-mile road walk that we have today. Unfortunately, it was made clear by Deseret representatives that the closure was permanent.

In 2014, FTA staff, volunteers and Forest Service partners began exploring options for rerouting the trail around the Deseret property. After working with professional consultants, holding stakeholder meetings, and completing a thorough gap analysis, a westerly routing around the ranch was agreed upon.

We were then tasked with connecting parcels owned by a variety of entities including the Fish and Wildlife Commission, Orange County, Osceola County, local land developers, utility services, and more. For over three years Forest Service and FTA staff have held countless meetings with land managers of these prospective trail segments. We are thrilled to announce that Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) have reached completion this Spring in Orange County and Osceola County. We have also received support from local Fish and Wildlife Commission staff to route the trail through Triple N WMA.

FTA staff and volunteers have begun blazing segments of trail as agreements with land managing entities are reached. So far, this has included Lake Lizzie Conservation Area in Osceola County as well as Split Oak Forest and Moss Park in Orange County. Crosby Island Marsh in Orange County is also scheduled to be blazed before the season ends.

While the blazed sections are currently open as section hikes, our hope is to open the reroute for long-distance hiking during the 2018-2019 season. For now, the current road walk connecting Bull Creek WMA and Tosohatchee WMA via Deer Park Road and Nova Road is still the official long-distance routing. Stay tuned on social media, our email newsletter and the Footprint magazine for more updates as this gap closure develops!
Big Cypress National Preserve hosts the Southern Terminus of the FNST, and is often touted as one of the most remote, scenic and unique sections of trail in the state. The preserve hosts 39-miles of the FNST, which alternates between pine flatwood and cypress swamp ecosystems that create wide vistas of air plants, cypress trees and crystal-clear water. The biodiversity at Big Cypress has something for nature enthusiasts of all kinds. For birders, anhingas, egrets, and herons are frequently seen along the trail. For wildflower enthusiasts, Big Cypress is home to over 30 species of orchids, including the Ghost Orchid—one of the rarest flowers in the world. If large mammals are more your style, trail hikers frequently come across black bear and Florida panther tracks.

If the incredible biodiversity of this preserve has you planning a visit, know that a section hike of this trail segment is one that requires extra effort and sensible planning. While incredibly beautiful, the terrain presents challenges and unpredictability. There is spotty cell phone service and no landscape features that can help determine your orientation. A GPS unit or the Florida Trail smart phone app (which is available online at https://floridahikes.com/florida-trail-app) are highly recommended. Water levels in swamp sections can vary from bone dry to waist deep. In wet conditions, you can expect a 1mph hiking pace when traversing rugged pitted limestone terrain.

The picture painted by the narrative above may leave you wondering—how does the trail in Big Cypress stay maintained? The short answer is an annual Volunteer Work Party with lots of advance planning, support from the National Park Service, hardworking volunteers, top-notch backcountry cooking, and a good sense of humor held by all!

Tools of the trail

We are thankful for the NPS Rangers who shuttled us to and from our base camp.
Our "primitive" base camp.
This year, FTA staff hosted the 5th annual Big Cypress Volunteer Work Party on January 26 – 31. We were joined by a mix of new and experienced volunteers from the Suncoast, Alligator Amblers and Big Cypress chapters. Our game plan each year is the same. Big Cypress rangers drive swamp buggies to help us set up a base camp near the center of the Preserve. We pack all the gear, food and trail tools we need for the week into a large trailer towed by the buggy and set up camp along the buggy road in a high, dry area. This year, our camp was along Oasis ORV road, just north of 13 Mile Camp. While it's true that we are in the backcountry, our base camp could certainly be considered “glamping,” featuring a WAG toilet, solar shower, fire ring and full camp kitchen.

For trail work, each morning we split into two crews going north and south. Each crew brings two brushcutters (think string-trimmer equipped with a round blade) for clearing low-lying vegetation, a pair of loppers for vegetation above the ground, hand saws for branches and small downed trees, and a paint kit for refreshing blazes. Each day the crews maintain as far as they can, then cache tools alongside the trail and head back to camp. In the evenings, we enjoy backcountry cooking, campfire stories and star gazing. With each new day, we hike to where we left off and continue onward with clearing. The last work day usually entails a long hike to the tools, one last short push of trail maintenance, and then a long return hike to bring back all the equipment. One of the most satisfying parts of the Big Cypress VWP is the hike back to camp on the last day of trail work. After a long, challenging week of trail maintenance, there is no better reward than hiking through the product of our labor-- a freshly cleared and blazed trail. This year we maintained the Florida Trail from mile 11 to mile 20.3.

Enjoy these photos taken throughout our week. If you would like to join our next Big Cypress VWP, please check the Volunteer Opportunities section of our website in the Fall for more information on how to register.
Treading through water.

Jeff Glenn, work party chef extraordinaire.

Lorraine Thomas from the Big Cypress Chapter enjoying a cup of swamp buggy-roadside espresso.

One of the many hearty meals the crew enjoyed throughout the week.

Taco Night
Becky Troop from the Alligator Amblers Chapters wowed us with her backcountry baking skills.

Kelly prepping dinner for the crew

This year’s Big Cypress trail crew: (From Left) Jeff Glenn, Ed Shindle, Lorraine Thomas, Michael Troop, Kelly Wiener, Van Tran, Becky Troop, Mike Williams and Larry Wallace.

The FT passing through a cypress dome
Kelly and Mike brushcutting the trail between 13 Mile Camp and I-75.

Mike Williams from the Suncoast Chapter waiting for the group to catch up on our hike back from a day of trail work.

Happy campers

A lot of what we hiked through looked like this.
Ed Shindle from the Suncoast Chapter studying up on native wildflowers in the area.

We rode out on swamp buggies to our base camp near 13 Mile Camp. Swamp buggies are massive. Here are two of our FTA staff members posing in front of one for scale.

Kelly and Van trying to sprout from the tree like these air plants.
HIKE LIKE A WOMAN

Hike Like A Woman is an online community full of inspiration and fun to encourage women to get outdoors and enjoy themselves – just the way they are!

Rebecca Walsh from Laramie, WY decided in 2015 to start this group. She had a blog online at HikeLikeAWoman.net and a small following on Facebook that quickly grew. She had no idea that so many women would be interested in her concept. “I was desperate to create a space on the internet that was positive, kind and welcoming to women of all shapes, sizes, ethnicities, sexual orientations and outdoor experience levels,” Rebecca explains. “I wanted to show that the outdoors, and hiking especially, is something for everyone.”

In 2016, Rebecca asked for women from the online community to apply to be HLAW Ambassadors. She was overwhelmed with applications and had to cut the application period off earlier than expected because of the number of applicants. After sifting through the applications, she chose 35 women to be Ambassadors for 2016-2017. The women were from all over the country and a handful were international. In 2017-2018 25 more HLAW Ambassadors joined the ranks. Another round of Ambassadors will soon be chosen for 2018-2019.

Behind the scenes, in private groups and apps, these ambassadors and Rebecca discuss, plan and bring to life amazing ideas to build Hike Like A Woman.

The community now has a podcast, magazine, weekly newsletter, online classes, gear guides, book clubs, challenges, a shop, community hiking groups and have expanded their social media to Instagram, YouTube and Pinterest. Much of what has been accomplished is also from the support of amazing sponsors, like REI.

Crystal Osborn and I are HLAW Ambassadors in Florida. Crystal leads the HLAW Central Florida Chapter that meets up and hikes regularly. To learn more about this local chapter, check it out at www.facebook.com/groups/hlawlocalscentralflorida.

Both Crystal and I enjoy hiking with our husbands and family, but agree it is awesome to connect with other women and empower them to adventure in the outdoors. A couple other HLAW Ambassadors shared why they enjoy being a part of HLAW. Jill Dunbar from Colorado shared, “I wanted to represent a demographic, that at times, gets overlooked – the older hiker.”

Annie Copeland from Kentucky leads a local group in her community and said, “I believe in and love the all-inclusive community for outdoor women we are building. Never in my entire life have I met so many strange women who are so different from me and yet through the bond of our love for the outdoors, I find such kinship and sisterhood.”
I encourage everyone to get out and explore!

If Hike Like A Woman can help you, please connect with us. We are always good for a few laughs too!

Lorna Radcliff in true HLAW spirit

Crystal Osbon, HLAW Ambassador for the Central Florida Chapter

Lorna along the FT at Black Tract of Twin Rivers State Forest

Jill Dunbar hiking the Marvine Lakes Trail in Colorado

Annie Copeland hiking in Giant City State Park in Illinois

Lorna enjoying the Suwannee River Section of the FT
How often do you witness a moment in life that seems so comical and entertaining that it feels like you’re watching a sitcom? With Becky and Michael Troop, it feels like you’re in the audience of *I Love Lucy* and *Seinfeld*.

I first met the Troops over the phone in early September, soon after I had just joined the FTA team. Becky called me to inquire about volunteer opportunities and to inform us of some glitches that were happening with the new website at the time. She mentioned they had recently retired and were interested in becoming involved with the FTA. Becky’s sincere tone and the curiosity in her voice, along with Michael’s upbeat chiming in the background, gave me the immediate impression that they would be a great addition to the FTA. I invited them to the 5th Annual Trail Skills Training we were hosting at the end of the month for new and active volunteers, and they registered soon after the call.

Within the Trail Skills class, I’d say about twenty percent of the chuckles and laughter shared among the group resulted from a witty remark made by one or both of the Troops. Becky and Michael were on fire with the execution of their puns. During our Trail Maintenance 101 class, volunteers were choosing tools to take out on the trail when Jeff pointed out the importance of distributing an equal assortment of tools in the field; followed with a practical question to the class, “What happens when you have too many loppers on the trail?” Becky immediately whipped around and responded, “You become lopsided.” On the hike back, someone pointed out edible Chanterelle mushrooms that were growing alongside the trail in Camp La No Che. I was walking close enough to Michael to hear him say, “Oh yeah, I know Chanterelle… I went to school with her. She was a nice girl…” Their sense of humor is random, witty and figurative and just my kind of funny.

We had the pleasure of having...
Becky and Michael join our Big Cypress backcountry work party in January. With their endearing back-and-forth banter combined with Becky’s tactful ways of gaining higher ground in their joking arguments, our group quickly coined names for them. “No. 1” for Becky and “No. 2” for Michael. Their high spirits and sense of wonder brought lightness and energy to our week in Big Cypress. As expected, Becky and Michael have turned out to be a wonderful addition to the FTA community. Here’s their story... from first sight to first work party.

WHERE ARE YOU BOTH ORIGINALLY FROM?
Becky: We’re both from the Midwest, although we didn’t meet until we were adults in Georgia. I grew up in a farming community in Indiana and Michael grew up in the big city of Chicago.

HOW DID YOU MEET?
Becky: We met in Fort Gordon, an army post outside of Augusta, Georgia. I was a first lieutenant and Michael was a captain in the Army Nurse Corps. I was assigned to the recovery room. By day, it was a recovery room and by night, it was a surgical intensive care unit. Michael was an anesthetist. One day, he came in pushing a patient in a bed from the OR into the recovery room... He was very attractive, he was very cute. He gave me a report on the patient and I think I did all kinds of stupid things like putting the oxygen mask upside down on the patient. I was very nervous. It was obvious we were attracted to each other. Shortly after that, we started dating. On the first date, he proposed to me. He said, “I think I’m in love with you. Will you marry me?” And I responded, “I think you’re infatuated.” But within a short time after that, we knew we were good. So we got married in Georgia.

HAVE YOU LIVED ANYWHERE ELSE?
Becky: Soon after we got married in August, Michael received orders in November to leave for Seoul by the following January. So I applied for orders too. We wound up living in Seoul, Korea for two years. We lived “on the economy” instead of in government housing. I learned to speak and read conversational Korean, which I don’t remember anymore. We traveled all over South Korea and had several Korean friends. We both took Tai Kwon Do.

Michael re-blazing the FT north of 13 Mile Camp in Big Cypress.
Michael: She broke my finger! Because….

Becky: Because you didn’t block correctly.

Michael: I didn’t think she could jump that high! I held my hand over her head and she jumped up and kicked my finger...

Becky: Well, you didn’t block correctly. And then after that, we moved to West Germany. We were both on active duty in the Army and were both captains by that time.

Michael: Yeah, she caught up.

Becky: Well, only in rank. I have always been the boss though.

Then in Germany, we had our daughter. That’s when we needed to make a decision about both of us being on active duty. I resigned from my position and Michael stayed on for twenty years. The Army has also taken us to Michigan, Hawaii and Kansas. Michael retired from the Army in 1991 and that’s when we moved to Florida. He continued his career as a civilian anesthetist for close to another twenty years.

Our daughter is a successful actress in L.A. She has lived there since 1999, which is when I returned to the workforce as the Director of Volunteers and Development for The Naples Players, our local community theater which Michael has also performed in.

WHERE DO YOU CURRENTLY RESIDE AND WHAT ARE YOU DOING NOW?
Becky: We live in Naples and we’re both retired, woot woot!

HOW IS LIFE AFTER RETIREMENT? WHAT ARE SOME GOALS OR NEW HOBBIES YOU’VE SOUGHT OUT SINCE RETIRING?
Becky: For me, I want to do all kinds of nature activities. So this year, I’ve taken all three Florida Master Naturalist courses. Michael lives vicariously through all my adventures. He likes to go hiking, but doesn’t fuss too much about camping.

Michael: As long as I’m with you, I don’t care.

Becky: Before I was retired, Michael was retired for almost 5 years. It’s better now that we’re both retired and doing activities together, especially active things. I don’t think of myself as being a retiree’s age. Sure, I can whine about my joints aching… But what’s the point? I would just rather keep active and do things to whatever limit I can.

DID YOU ALWAYS HAVE AN AFFINITY FOR THE OUTDOORS?
Becky: Always. I’ve always enjoyed being outdoors and going on adventures, whether it was hiking or kayaking.

Michael: Yeah. She’s a good kayaker. I’m a good drowner.

Becky: Yeah, he’s good at capsizing his kayak.

My enthusiasm for the outdoors brings Michael out to whatever I discover. Last year, Michael and I built a small travel trailer to haul our camping gear. We enjoy tent camping at state parks and hope to camp our way across the country in upcoming years.
HOW DID YOU FIRST HEAR ABOUT THE FLORIDA TRAIL AND THE FTA?
When did you join the FTA?
When we moved to Florida, Michael and my dad had hiked the Appalachian Trail several times. We went one time to Collier-Seminole State Park and they were having a big FTA trail maintenance event. That was in the early ‘90s. We did some trail work then at the event, but we were both busy at the time. We just couldn’t make commitments to it at that time. But the thought of becoming involved never went away, we always considered doing trail work again.

The FTA was something I was interested in looking into. It was this last summer that I was looking into the FTA and called with questions about the website. It was in that call that I learned from Van about the Trail Skills Training that was coming up and we signed up and went.

We just recently joined the Alligator Amblers Chapters. So far, we have gone on a hike with the group in the Picayune Strand and I’ve been attending the monthly meetings.

HOW DID YOU ENJOY THE BIG CYPRESS VOLUNTEER WORK PARTY?
Becky: I felt very fortunate to be able to come to the work party. It felt like we were doing some kind of sociological experiment: You put these nine people together for a week and see how they do. I think it turned out pretty well. I think there was a nice division of power so that we could see who the leaders were and comply with that structure. I think the length of the work party was a really good time period.

Michael: I think the four days of trail work were perfect.

Becky: The physical aspect of it was fun while it lasted. It was just the right amount of time to feel content with the week.

Michael: That water by the cypress dome was so beautiful and so clear.

Becky: Another thing I thought was so remarkable was the knowledge base of each of the volunteers; each of the different things each person brought to the week. I really enjoyed the inquisitive aspect of the experience.

Michael: What makes it fun for us is you guys in the FTA have learned what is safe, what to look for, how to set things up and to arrange the activity so that it’s fun.

WHAT WAS YOUR FAVORITE ASPECT OF THE TRIP?
Michael: Meeting the staff.

Becky: The awesome scenery. The fact that we were so remote and everything looked magical and mystical. The awe that I felt just being in that natural surrounding—the crystal clear water and the bromeliads filling the trees.

Michael: I was really impressed with my wife. She cut such a nice path with the brushcutter. It was wonderful to walk back on. I was really impressed with her work.

Becky: It was nice to run into hikers while we were doing trail work on the section. I can’t imagine how they must have felt transitioning from an area that has yet to be maintained and then walking into where we were doing trail work.

WHAT DO YOU ENJOY THE MOST ABOUT DOING TRAIL WORK?
Becky: I just like seeing whatever is in front of us. Seeing the work as it unfolds.

Michael: I like being physically active and energetic. I’m reclaiming my youth by being active. That, to me, is important.

I’ve always believed that life is a series of concessions. I move a little bit slower now. I need to use glasses to read. My thought processes are not as good as they once were. But to be able to go out and do something that is physical and to be able to keep up with younger people, that gives me a sense that I’m not too old anymore. Age is not that glamorous.

In a way, my body slowing down has helped me to realize what’s important. When I was younger, I was always so set on getting from Point A to Point B as soon as I could. I wish I’d known what I know now, to just slow down and enjoy the moment. That’s what matters the most.
WHAT ARE SOME OF YOUR GREATEST ACHIEVEMENTS?
Becky: I think one of my greatest achievements is having a long successful marriage for almost 43 years. It's not always easy to navigate rough passages, but when you have a partner whose positive attributes outweigh the negatives, it's worth persevering.

Michael: These are not exactly achievements but rather capstones. And there are two. The first is having been fortunate to be married to a thoughtful, caring and knowledgeable woman who, by the way I find as beautiful and cute as I did when I first met her over 43 years ago. And the second (and just as important) is having a beautiful and talented daughter who has become (outside my wife) my closest friend. I find that she has become wise beyond her years and is certainly my intellectual superior. What more can a father ask for other than maybe a new Mercedes.

WHAT’S YOUR FAVORITE QUOTE OR PIECE OF WISDOM?
Becky: My piece of wisdom is that it's never too late to learn how to calm the mind and find joy in simple things.

Michael: Among the things you can give and still keep are your words, your smile and a grateful heart.
Bears are very common on the Ocala National Forest, but close encounters with them on the trail are rare and negative experiences are basically non-existent. I will share a personal photo though, which shows that bears might have a penchant for comic defecation. Even if you store your food properly, be mindful of other smelly items like stoves.

This 2010 photo from a night spent out on Hopkins Prairie goes to show that no matter how careful you are, a bear might still zero in on your stove.

More recently, however, a bear did cause some damage and caused quite the scare to hikers camped at the legendary, and arguably overused, Hidden Pond in the Juniper Wilderness. The result of this encounter led to the closure of the entire 14,283-acre area, including the 10 miles of FNST that traverse it. Occurring during the peak of the annual hiking season and in the midst of one of the busiest thru-hiking years ever on the FNST, this closure had major implications for the trail during its two-week duration. While FWC worked to locate, trap, remove, and relocate the bears, hikers traveling through were forced to follow a 10-mile, waterless roadwalk around the wilderness to the Pat’s Island trailhead on the northern wilderness boundary.

This problem was a long time coming. Hidden Pond is most likely the most popular overnight destination on the entire 1,300 mile Florida Trail. On a busy weekend, fall through spring, there can be as many as 150 backpackers headed towards this oasis. With a spring fed pond, grand prairie views, and easy access, of course it would be such a popular place. However, with such heavy use by overnight users, the impact is heavy and carries with it inevitable repercussions, such as wildlife encounters that cause complete closure of the area during peak season. These are common problems that are found in other heavily used areas as well: human and other forms of physical waste, poorly managed campfires, impacted water quality, trampling of non-durable surfaces and noise pollution.

It is a very hard balance between keeping a wilderness wild and managing a resource for the enjoyment of the public. On one hand, the US Forest Service is bound by law, in this case the 1964 Wilderness Act, to maintain the wilderness as a roadless expanse without the encumbrances of modern tools and infrastructure. On the other hand, when dozens of people need to relieve themselves in a relatively small area with only one single water source, when they all want a campfire and when they all bring in food without proper storage containers; how do we ensure the resource is adequately protected?

This is a question that brings about good debate and challenges managers to make hard decisions. At this point, the FTA and the staff of the Ocala National Forest are working together to mitigate the impact trail users have on the land and wildlife. Nobody wants this to happen in the future, but a lot of work needs to happen to make sure it doesn’t. As a first step, the FTA is working on creating brand new kiosks to be installed at the Pat’s Island trailhead. These will include educational panels directed at bear awareness and Leave No Trace ethics. Funding for this project is coming from a recent grant awarded by Lucky’s Market in Gainesville. These funds were awarded with the wilderness in mind and timing is just right to put it to good use.
When you join the state-wide Florida Trail Association you automatically become a member of your local chapter based upon your zip code. However, members may attend the activities of any chapter and may transfer to any chapter they wish simply by informing the FTA Office.

Florida Trail activities are organized by our local chapters and are led by authorized volunteer activity leaders. Many of our activities are open to the general public so you can get to know us before you join. Activities can be found online at www.floridatrail.org. Click on “About Us” then click on the “Upcoming Events” button on the left. Local activities are usually also listed on the chapter websites, Facebook pages and Meetups. Click on “About Us” then “Our Chapters” for links to local chapter sites.

Participants in activities must sign an Assumption of Risk form and agree to accept personal responsibility for their safety and the safety of accompanying minors. Always contact the activity leader in advance for more information, to let them know you are attending, to find out any special requirements or equipment for the activity, and to check for any last minute changes.

For more information about chapters and links to websites/meetups/photos go online to FloridaTrail.org/about-us/chapters/ then select the chapter
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Ed Shindle, Larry Wallace and Mike Williams are all from the Suncoast Chapter. They are incredible trail maintainers and have made tremendous contributions to the FT.