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Sisters bag 48 N.H. peaks with their mom

Mother-daughter bonding taken to new heights



FAMILY PHOTO

Alex Herr of Somerville atop Mt. Liberty in Franconia, N.H., in 2010.

By Kathy Shiels Tully | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MAY 13, 2012

Every mother wants to be a good one, and most will go any distance in any direction to

reach that goal.

But for Trish Ellis Herr, 41, of Somerville, looking for an outlet for her daughter, there was only one way to go.

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Up.

Make that up *and* down. More than 48 times.

“I found out about the ‘NH48’ by accident,” says Herr, author of “Up: A Mother and Daughter’s Peakbagging Adventure.” Looking at a brochure at a New Hampshire information kiosk while out on a family hike in 2008 with her husband, Hugh, 5-year-old Alex, and 3-year-old Sage, Herr remembers thinking, “This is pretty.”

A hiker’s version of stamp collecting, peakbagging, or simply “bagging,” is hiking to the top of mountains, usually in a particular region and having a particular feature, to “collect” or “bag” the peak. New Hampshire’s White Mountains, where Herr’s family has a second home, boasts the “NH48,” 48 mountains towering 4,000 feet or higher.

Although mountain hikes are usually an adult activity, Trish had been seeking a way to challenge Alex’s indefatigable energy.

“We walked everywhere,” she says.

But first, Herr, who home-schools both girls, wanted to make sure it was a decision her daughter made, and not one forced on her. So Herr asked.

“Hey, Alex. Do you want to try to hike a really big grown-up mountain?”

A boundless mother-daughter adventure began with Alex’s exuberant “Yes!”

“The first one was a whim,” Herr says. “It was like, ‘Let’s see how far we can go.’” Even



JOSH REYNOLDS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Sage (left) and Alex Herr, on a stroll in Somerville with parents Trish and Hugh.

for the self-driven, bagging the NH48 can take years.

Alex's goal? Bag NH48 before her seventh birthday.

As the mother-daughter team began, the young hiker asked her mother to keep notes along the way. On the blog, "Trish and Alex Hike the Whites," Herr posted their adventures so friends and family could follow along online as the twosome set out to become members of The Four Thousand Footer Club, founded in 1957 by the Appalachian Mountain Club.

Over 15 months, Alex, now 9, climbed, reaching her goal at age 6 and 8 months, even before she lost her first baby tooth. Sage, now 7, later bagged NH48 at age 6 years and 7 months.

Before an embodiment of Amy Chua's controversial "Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother" springs to mind — Chua's philosophy is that parents place relentless pressure on their children to achieve ambitious goals — think again.

Herr stands almost 6 feet tall, and holds a master's degree in biological anthropology from Harvard University.

It is clear that the gorp/hot chocolate-packing, backpacking mom's rock-solid intention for both her daughters is that "they can accomplish something big, something huge . . . that to reach a goal, they must put one foot in front of the other and persevere . . . that above all else, they know that little does not mean weak, that girls are indeed strong, and that practically anything is possible."

The power of positive thinking fuels their first peakbagging excursion in the chapter "I Think I Can' Works" (Peak No. 1: Mount Tecumseh, June 7, 2008). Excited, they decide to continue.

With each step, the mutual bonds of trust, respect, and honesty between them — critical for anyone out hiking on the mountain — deepened even further. On or off the mountain, it's crystal-clear that's how Herr operates.

"It's important that the level of trust between mom and kids go both ways," Herr says. "I always try to be completely truthful. So if it's going to be a long hard trail, I tell

them, so they know what to expect.”

But, as Herr learned, not everything can be planned.

In the chapter “Some Things Will Always Be Beyond Your Control” (Freak Thunderstorm on Mount Tom, Aug. 16, 2008), Herr describes her worst time as a parent.

It was a hike, early on, that Sage, then 3, joined. Trish’s honest, detailed account of the dramatic predicament the threesome found themselves in during a sudden storm will leave readers shaking.

But what is more striking than the breathtaking vistas they are rewarded with at the top — including double rainbows — are the mountains of emotions Herr expresses as she observes her daughter growing, not just in hiking skills, but in wisdom about people, learning lessons useful in life: Joy, love, and amazement.

Just who is the student is open for debate, as Herr recalls with humor in “Lose the Paranoia” (Peaks No. 6 and No. 7: Mount Osceola and East Osceola, Aug. 2, 2008). When she sees Alex, ahead of her on the trail, standing next to an ax-wielding man, Herr’s big-city mindset perceives “stranger danger.” During a moment of panic, she feels helpless as she watches from some rocks a short distance away.

When Herr’s rational mind returns — he’s a trail worker — she chides herself. “The average killer doesn’t hike 4 miles up a steep and rocky trail to look for potential victims.”

Herr balances hiking, heart, and humor with heedfulness in “Mistakes Can Have Serious Consequences” (Hugh Tells a Cautionary Tale, August 2008). After observing that Alex is gaining “gusto” after quickly ticking off nine of the 48 peaks, and melding it with a “dangerous sense of invincibility,” Herr asks her husband, a renowned climber himself and tenured professor of media arts and robotics at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, to tell his girls through his own life experience how overconfidence can lead to split-second mistakes and life-changing — or life-ending — consequences.

Beckoned into an intimate family moment, readers learn a well-documented story of

Hugh's accident in 1982 on Mount Washington. Why at age 17, both of Hugh Herr's legs had to be amputated below the knees.

Though not a "helicopter" mom, hovering over her kids while they play, Herr writes, "in the Whites, things are very different."

For anyone dreaming of peakbagging, Trish's advice is focused on "safety first: Always have enough energy to get back to the road, be prepared, bring a headlamp, water" and other hiking essentials.

But her written advice for reaching any goals — at any age — is inspirational.

"If you want to do something big, something daring and grand and huge," she writes, "then don't automatically shrug and assume that you're too young, too old, too weak, too busy, too poor, too frazzled, or too small. Learn, persevere, sweat. Take the time to figure out how to do it correctly, then go to it with a giant spirit of adventure and enjoy the climb."

As for Alex's philosophy?

"Play games on the way. Tell each other riddles. Make up silly songs. Play word games when it gets steep." Alex, who also enjoys swimming, gymnastics, cooking, and karate, recommends "20 Questions."

Visibly impressed at her daughter's well-earned wisdom, Herr nods.

"Yes, silliness is good. If you really want to get to a destination, being silly helps."

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Lessons learned

A sampling of chapter titles associated with 15 lessons, useful for hiking — and in life — from Trish Ellis Herr's new book, "UP: A Mother and Daughter's Peakbagging Adventure," collected during her trek up New Hampshire's 48 peaks with young Alex:

Lesson 2

"Know What You're Getting Into"
(Failed Mount Tecumseh Attempt, April 3, 2008)

Lesson 8

"Happiness Is Only Real When Shared"
(Autumn, 2008)

Lesson 9

"Some Risks Are Worth Taking"
(Winter 2008-2009)

Lesson 10

"To Get to Where She Wants to Go, a Girl Must Punch Through Rotting Snow"
(Peak No. 30: Mount Moriah, April 25, 2009)

Lesson 14

"Enjoy the Journey While It Lasts"
(Peak No. 48: Mount Moosilauke, Aug. 30, 2009)

For video trailer of the mother-daughter hikes, upcoming book readings, and more, go to: www.trishalexsaee.com.

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