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MEMORIAL DAY 1997

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WOMEN'S PROFESSIONAL GROUP OF THE
ASSOCIATION FOR EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION



TAKE BACK THE TRAILS: TEN YEARS LATER

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This year, 2007, marks the 10th anniversary of "Take Back the Trails" (TBTT). This major national initiative, sponsored by the AEE/WPG, was sparked in response to the tragic murders of two young female outdoor enthusiasts. As they ventured on a backpacking journey through beautiful Shenandoah National Park in Virginia during the spring of 1996 their trek through life abruptly ended. For many years thereafter, the slayings were a mystery and began to raise concern about the safety of women in our nation's parks and outdoor spaces.

Background Information: Julie Williams, 24, from Minnesota, and Lollie Winan, 26, from Maine, were on a personal hiking/camping trip long the A.T. in Shenandoah National Park on Memorial weekend (1996) when they were slain by an unknown assailant. Julie had a degree in Geology from Carleton College in MN and Lollie was majoring in outdoor recreation leadership at Maine's Unity College. They were both avid outdoorswomen who were dedicated to enhancing their outdoor expertise and leadership skills. They had met while studying to become trip leaders at Woodswomen, Inc. in Minneapolis in 1995, and had been living in Burlington, VT.

Shortly after the murders, several groups on the east coast held memorial services including a memorial hike in Virginia near the women's tent site. The murders were a mystery, and raised concern about the safety – for all people - in the nation's parks. In a town that borders Shenandoah National Park, a young couple told a reporter they were too afraid to go there now. In another interview, one mother who took a group of children camping in the Blue Ridge Mountains after the murders said: *"I'm really concerned and frightened, I made a point to pitch my tent near the men and that gives me a lot of comfort to be near them."* What message does this send?

Five years ago (2002) a man name Darrell Rice was indicted for the slayings of Julianne and Lollie and the Justice Department announced that *"the defendant targeted them because he believed they were gay and deserved to die because they were lesbians."* – However, unfortunately charges were dropped because of some changed testimony and the prosecutors' concern they would not be able to convict. They would not be able to re-try, so they wanted to be cautious. Since then, the case has been looked at by others, but Rice continues to be the main suspect. The investigators and prosecution team in VA continue to be determined.



A few statistics: The outdoors is known to be a safe haven where fewer crimes typically occur than in our urban areas. I have NPS crime statistics available from 1990 to 2002 and data from the last five years are in the process of being gathered. In the meantime, this particular 12 years of data show larceny and theft at nearly 75% followed by burglary at 11%. Also, aggravated assault follows with less than 6%. From 47,828 reported crimes, homicide/manslaughter and

rape accounted for 528 cases during this period. These statistics notwithstanding, as many avid outdoors women and scholars indicated, one is too many to die in the outdoors; we don't need statistics to justify the need for this type of initiative.

TBTT Goals: There were many reasons why leaders within the WPG wanted to move forward with this national initiative. With the support of the AEE staff and Board of Directors, the following goals guided this project that occurred during Memorial Weekend 1997:

- To recognize the deaths, violence, harassment, etc. that have occurred to ANY women in the outdoors, and to engage in a positive and inspiring crusade towards ending violence against women in general. This national initiative was dependent on grass roots efforts at the state level.
- For 30,000 (or more!) women across the country to hike, backpack, and/or camp along the trails of this nation's forests and parks. If we were to break this down, that's only 600 women per state.
- For women to get out on the trails in whatever way is most comfortable whether solo, with small groups of friends, in large organized groups, or with a club, outdoor organization, etc.

Regardless of how this took place, the message was critical and the impact was intense. We believed these goals were attainable and encouraged people to get outdoors for one day, the entire weekend, or a week. It was up to individuals or local organizers to make it happen.

As stated by a woman from the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club (member) in a 1997 personal interview: *"You just can't live your life in fear. It just doesn't seem fair to let the criminals take even our willingness to go and do what we love the most away from us, regardless of the danger, whether it's real or perceived."*

An extensive action plan was developed by a small group of WPG leaders and approved by AEE. This included a full full-scale press kit with posters, flyers, model newspaper articles, etc. Special thanks to my mother, Colette Roberts, for donating her graphic arts talent and services in designing the logo and developing many of our materials.

Highlights of Memorial Weekend 1997

Given the global impact of this incident, the initiative did not just occur in the USA. This became international news with activities occurring as far away as New Zealand and Australia! There were two websites: One was managed by folks at the Princeton Outdoor Program (thanks to Rick Curtis for that!) and a second site was designed and managed by

supporters at Carleton College in MN, Julianne's alma mater. Scores of links from organizations from across the globe were connected to these sites as well.

Because this was a national initiative, our goal was to have at least one contact person in 50% of the states across the country. By Memorial Weekend, of the actual 1997 initiative, there were 48 contact people in 33 states. Hundreds of women and men were deeply engaged and committed by organizing events and spreading the word through marketing our objectives that were intended to be long-term overall.

Thousands of people went out that weekend. Thanks to everyone involved for helping reach our goals!



Press Conference, Shenandoah National Park
Memorial Day weekend 1997

Nearly 30 major colleges and universities coast to coast, mostly through the outdoor programs or women's studies departments, organized or hosted activities. TBTT T-shirts were sold across the country; thanks to long-time AEE Member Margaret Lechner, former Wilderness Program Director at Earlham College, and her students for handling this for us. This was a huge undertaking and turned out to be a valuable fundraiser contributing to the success of this initiative.

In addition to thousands of private individual hikes and camping trips, many wonderful organized activities occurred in large numbers. Examples include: Organized discussion groups pertaining to women's safety in the wilderness (e.g., fear, solo hikes, protection); women's self-defense workshops; ceremonial activities with teens; safety pamphlet prepared and distributed nationally; letter sent to President Clinton by a graduate student at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; and a booth that was set up at the National Organization for Women Conference in Utah included information about this initiative and women outdoors.

More than 15 T.V. and radio stations across the country picked up this story, over 50 newspapers in several major cities (and a multitude of small towns) wrote an article about this initiative, nearly a dozen

magazines and over 20 organizational newsletters wrote stories to assist with providing exposure and encouraging individuals to participate. Two other extremely valuable outcomes stemmed from this initiative. First, six different scholarship funds across the country were established as a result of this project and, second an important empirical study at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, further propelled the issues of fear and increasing safety for women in national parks and outdoor recreation (e.g., leadership, participation, law enforcement).

Ten years later: Reporters still tell the story and inquire about changes and trends, and brutal incidents across the country continue to haunt women in national parks and forest lands (for example, Yosemite Nat'l Park and Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie Nat'l Forest). At the same time, every year – for the last ten years – women continue to enjoy the benefits of outdoor recreation in growing numbers. There are more female leaders and guides, as well as outdoor adventure programs for women/girls, then ever before.

Each year for the last 10-years, the WPG has promoted the “Women's Outdoor Memorial Gatherings” on or around Memorial Day Weekend. Additionally, the Central Minnesota Community Foundation, that established a scholarship fund in Julie Williams honor for girls and young women in outdoor activities, continues to thrive. The Williams family is also proud to maintain an annual family bike ride each fall (around Julie’s birthday) to raise funds for this program. Patsy Williams, Julianne’s mom, serves on the research/grants committee.

For the last decade, all across the country, we have also seen an increase in safety in wilderness discussions, more self-defense workshops, and a growth in scholarships for women and girls interested in outdoor leadership training opportunities. Furthermore, there has been a rise in empirical research on women outdoors as well as the exploring the specific topic of “fear” more in-depth (e.g., fear on trails, generally, and fear relating to solo trips).

I submitted a proposal for a presentation at the AEE International Conference in Little Rock in November. This session will present the story of TBTT and its amazing outcomes as a significant grassroots effort to recognize the deaths, violence or harassment that has occurred to any woman in the outdoors. Additionally, Dr. Deborah Bialeschki has been invited to present research highlights and use the TBTT as a case example for discussion. This TBTT initiative continues to provide memories as well as a sense of renewal towards engaging in a positive and inspiring crusade towards creating change and increasing safety for all outdoor enthusiasts.

This Memorial Day weekend, 2007,
we encourage you to get outdoors to
hike, backpack, camp, bike, climb...
Whatever moves your spirit!

For more information about Take Back the Trails or a copy of the 1997 “final report” visit:

http://www.aee.org/skin1/pages/US/wpg/gather_main.htm

AEE / Women’s Professional Group - Main Website:

<http://www.aee.org/skin1/pages/US/wpg/wpg.htm>



Patsy Williams and Nina Roberts
Shenandoah National Park, 1997

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