

The Hard Way

10/25/20

# From The Principal's Pen

The Silence. The Solitude. The sun beating down on your face while the crisp fall air blows around you. I love the outdoors. Last weekend, my wife and I took a two-hour drive north into the Roan Mountains on the border of Western North Carolina and Eastern Tennessee. When we arrived, vehicles crowded the parking lot. Had we gotten there any later in the morning, we would have been waiting for a spot to park. As with most crowded trails, the majority of the traffic dissipated in the first mile, and after three miles, only a few hikers were around. By the time we arrived at the grassy bald four miles deep in the woods, we were relatively isolated, with only an occasional hiker passing by. I love and long for these kinds of moments. After a four-mile hike, we spent the next half hour laying in the grass, staring out into an amazing view of the mountains. Very few moments are as energizing for me as these quiet moments on a distant remote mountain top.

After spending a fair bit of time in the woods, we have perfected what we are comfortable with in our packs. I am always looking for ways to reduce how much we carry but not compromise on the essentials. I usually have a favorite light sweater, a light rain jacket, a first aid kit, a multitool, water, and a light snack. Enough that I could make it through a cold night in the woods if disaster struck, but not so much that I am carrying half the house with me when I travel. Having the proper equipment and wearing the appropriate clothing and footwear has been critical for us on more than one occasion.

A few years ago, I was called in the early afternoon to help with an injured hiker's carryout a few miles deep into the woods. It was summer, so I had on shorts and a t-shirt and was young and inexperienced. I never considered the possibility we might be deeper in the woods than I anticipated and that it might take longer than I thought. We were six miles into the woods when we found the injured hiker, and we quickly realized that we would not have enough daylight to cross the creek with him multiple times safely. We decided to pack in with him for the night and bring him out the next morning. I spent a frigid night in the woods because of my poor preparation.

The event stuck with me, and as I have gotten older, I notice it when we pass hikers that are ill-prepared for the circumstances they are facing. This Saturday, we were hiking a section of trail that was covered by round mid-sized rocks. The kind that would easily curl an ankle if you were not incredibly careful. Because of both experience and age, I have boots that have a considerable amount of ankle support. The young man that passed us at the three and a half mile mark had neither the experience nor the footwear for the trail he was on. He appeared to be a young middle schooler, and he had chosen to hike this day in a pair of beach sandals. Yes, plastic beach sandals. Held on by a tiny amount of fabric at the front of the foot, it was clear he had not experienced a twisted ankle deep in the woods. I could only hope he didn't learn his lesson on the day he walked in front of me. We had no interest in having to help carry him out of the woods.

While I don't want to wish bad luck on anyone, lessons learned the hard way are some of the best lessons. Twenty years ago, I got stuck in the woods on a cold night, unprepared for what I would face. I haven't made that mistake again. As my son grew into an adult, I would caution him and give him the sage words of an

elder's wisdom. He never listened to those lessons quite as well as he did the ones he learned the hard way. He never messed with an electric fence after touching it the first time in the pasture. He was a bit more cautious after going too fast on his bike and wiping out. We never want to put our children in a position where they can be seriously injured or permanently damaged by avoidable mistakes, but sometimes we do need to step back and let them figure it out on their own. Because lessons learned the hard way are lessons that will stick with them for a lifetime.