

Quest-a-thon 2021 recap by Aurelia Umholtz

What's it like to walk two marathons up and over mountains, through fields, and across brooks in a day? It's impossible to put into words, but I'll give it a try.

In retrospect, 51.6 miles went by in a blur. The Appalachian Trail is sometimes called the "Green Tunnel," and while it wasn't too green in early November, I certainly got tunnel vision when completing Quest-A-Thon. I just kept envisioning Hoyt Rd. at the end of it all. It's a strange feeling to be awake for close to 36 continuous hours, then to be on your feet and walking most of that time is even stranger.

For the first 30 miles, it feels like you're just out for a long day hike with friends. Reality sets in around the fifth hour of walking in darkness with nothing but a small patch of trail illuminated by your headlamp in front of you. That's when Quest-A-Thon really begins. When the conversations die down, either because you've exhausted all topics, or everyone is in too much physical discomfort to talk. When you're searching with your tiny spot of light for the next tree with that reflective white blaze that means you're still on the Appalachian Trail. Eventually, our ears got so good at identifying the right crunch of trodden-down leaves under foot that the trail markers were merely a formality.

There was a moment, right before sunrise, when I really thought I was going to collapse. I was exhausted, my vision blurring and my blinks growing longer. My feet kept going, despite my aching joints, but I was sure I would just keel over. But just then, the horizon began to turn blue instead of black, and it just kept getting lighter and lighter every time I caught sight of it. And then there was pink, then orange, and yellow, and the whole thing became bearable again. We were going to finish, and we were going to finish within 24 hours. I began to run. (Then promptly stopped, because after 47 miles, it's sort of impossible to maintain any pace faster than a brisk walk.)

The second ever Quest-A-Thon was a success! We had nearly triple as many finishers as last time, and many more total miles hiked. None of it would have been possible without the help of our amazing volunteers, who braved the cold and exhaustion to support the hikers every step of the way (sometimes literally). We cannot thank these individuals enough.

Of course, this feat is a signal of our fortitude as a community, but I think it is really a testament to the Quest Leadership Program. The fact that so many people wanted to hike, volunteer, or donate to further a program must mean it is something pretty special. And I know I am in good company in believing so.