

Amicus Curious

Lawyer documents epic journey

By Bethany Krajelis
Law Bulletin staff writer

Katherine M. Imp can't stomach the idea of eating peanut butter or tuna.

That's because for about five months last year, she dined almost exclusively on dry and canned food as she, her brother and best friend trekked 2,178.3 miles to complete the Appalachian National Scenic Trail.

Putting aside the trip's effect on her taste buds, Imp, an associate at Segal, McCambridge, Singer & Mahoney Ltd., said the adventure provided her with a lifetime of memories and a positive attitude.

"I think that's how you feel when you finish an egregious trek like the Appalachian," she said. "It is a sense of peace and belief that anything is possible."

With some help from her hiking partners — brother Brandon Imp and friend Emily Ginger — and her film producer friend Jason Furrer, Imp captured their 14-state hike on film to produce a documentary titled, "Beauty Beneath the Dirt."

Furrer only took part in parts of the hike, but he instructed them on the best ways to film their experiences and then contributed to the post-production process.

Now, about a year after her grueling trip came to an end in August 2010, Imp said she must wait to learn if her documentary will be shown at a handful of film festivals.

Imp, who focuses her law practice on toxic tort and product liability matters, said she hopes her movie will make its way through the independent film festival circuit and eventually be shown on cable television.

"All of the films made so far about the Appalachian Trail are about the logistics of hiking, which is important and great, but I wanted to make a film that showed what it was really like," she said, adding with a laugh that "I think we definitely did that."

The documentary, she said, showcases their hike, along with some of the tough challenges they encountered on their trek from Georgia to Maine.

"It's wasn't a vacation and it wasn't just an adventure. It was life," Imp said of the hike. "As is in life, you live and grow and have ups and downs. I think we showed that in the film."

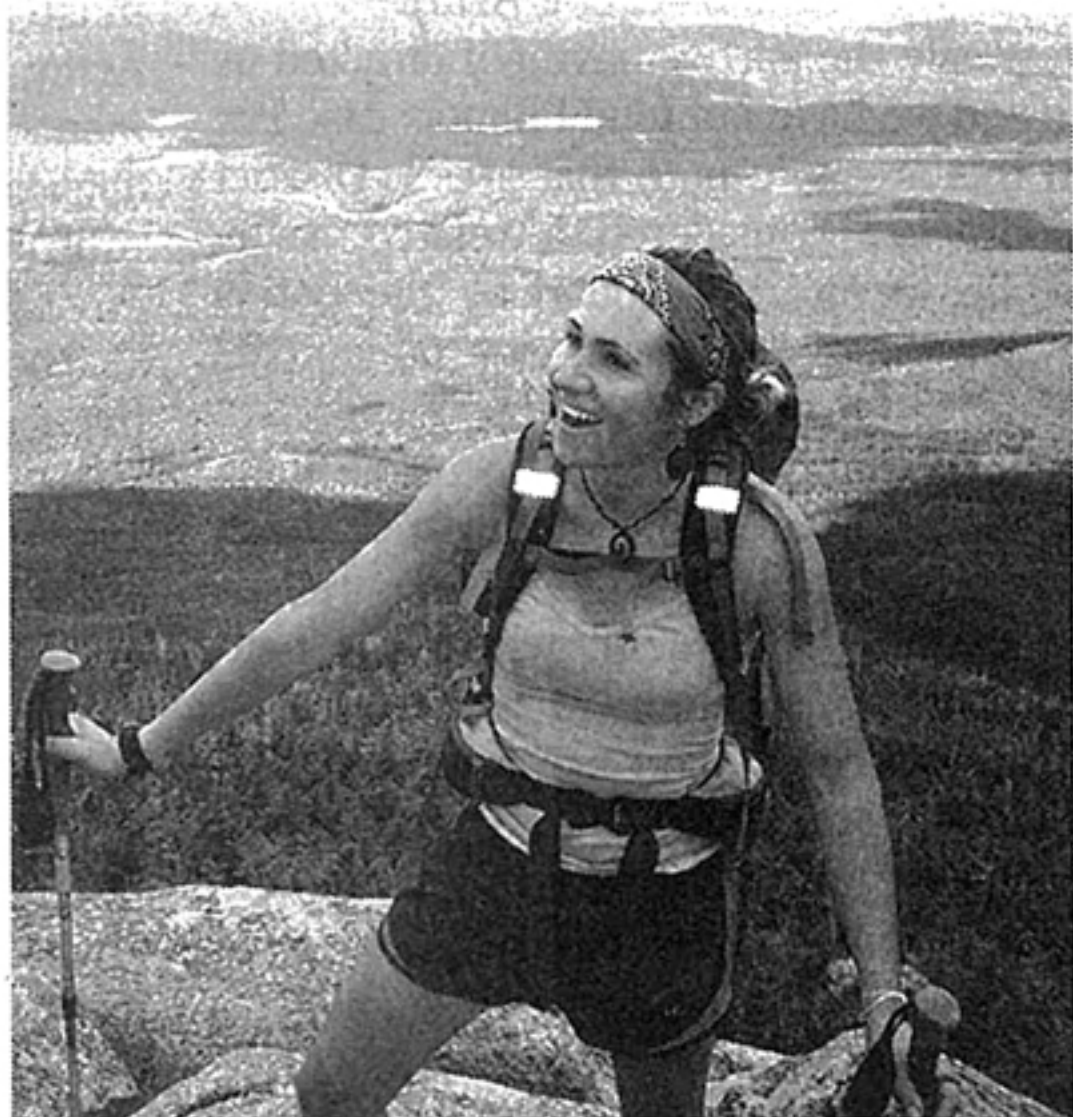
Imp said the idea to attempt the hike came to her while taking an exam during her first semester at the University of Illinois College of Law.

"I don't even remember what exam it was, but I just remember thinking 'I'd rather be doing anything else. I'd rather be hiking the Appalachian Trail,'" she said. "I decided to go with it."

Despite a lack of experience in both filmmaking and long-range hiking, Imp said she was determined to not only try, but to complete both the trail and documentary.

"There was never a day that went by that I didn't think I would finish this film," she said. "I just didn't know what the story would be until post-production."

Her idea, however, didn't come to fruition without hitting a few roadblocks. When she first



Katherine M. Imp

asked her brother and friend to join in her adventure, they declined.

Imp's brother, Brandon Imp, said he remembers thinking his sister's idea was absurd and too large of a commitment to make as a then-college student worried about his future.

But, by the time his sister asked him the second time, Brandon was on board. He said he became inspired and intrigued after following a classmate's blog about his own experiences on the Appalachian Trail.

Brandon, who is now 23 and conducts clinical research for the University of California, said he was a little nervous about the hike aspect of his sister's idea, but was more than excited to be part of a documentary.

"Everything I do deals with biology and medicine, but theater is my huge passion," Brandon said. "There is a lot of drama in this film. We knew the relationship between the three of us would make a great film. It's definitely not your traditional outdoor adventure film."

Imp said their hike started on March 10, 2010, after years of logistical planning, which included her and her brother having to graduate a semester early from their respective schools.

Before they left, Imp said they found sponsors that provided them with food and clothing. She also said she sought advice from some of her law school professors about the legal issues of making a documentary.

She needed to create a limited liability company, draft partnership agreements, releases and obtain permits to film on private property.

Paul D. Healey, one of Imp's former law professors at the University of Illinois College of Law, said Imp shared her plans with him early on.

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"When she came in and said she wanted to walk the entire trail and make a movie about it, I encouraged her because it sounded like a great idea," he said. "I knew she could do it. Kate always impressed me."

Healey said he kept tabs on Imp by following her blog, which included updates, stories and videos.

Imp said they hiked about 20 miles a day with 35-pound backpacks filled with clothing, supplies and canned food like tuna, which she said she hasn't eaten since she completed the trail on Aug. 12, 2010.

Imp said some of her favorite moments in their five-month trip occurred off the trail in nearby towns, where they would occasionally take a day off from hiking.

Imp said the people in these towns were incredibly friendly and frequently offered them "trail magic," which is a term hikers use to describe the free meals, laundry, showers and couches people offer.

Brandon said the hike allowed him to experience parts of the country that he otherwise would never have seen, but that it wasn't without its challenges.

He said traveling with two women in the outdoors for five months was rather interesting.

While his sister and her friend were focused on their emotions and how the trip affected their relationship, Brandon said he was more worried about surviving in an environment filled with snakes, one of his worst fears.

He said he got a little dramatic about his fear during his confessionals — each of the

hikers took turns talking to the camera by themselves about their experiences.

They each had their own hiking nickname as well. Collectively known as "The Traveling Circus," Imp was referred to as the "Ringleader," Brandon's nickname was "Monkey," based on his morning grunts and Ginger was dubbed "Lighting."

David Benjamin Schaffer, an associate at Segal, McCambridge, who works with Imp, said he felt inspired after watching the documentary.

He is one of the few people who has seen the film, which has not yet been publicly released under the rules of the film festivals that Imp submitted her documentary to.

"The movie was just really cool," he said. "I was really moved and blown away not only by how well done the whole thing was but by how much it made me realize that you can do anything you want to do. It was really inspiring in a way I didn't expect."

Schaffer, who handles toxic tort matters and enjoys hiking, said Imp appears to apply some of the lessons learned on her trip to her daily law practice.

"I think when you've done something as intense as a thru-hike trail, you learn not to sweat the small stuff in your professional life," he said. "I think you learn to take things with a little larger grain of salt and I think Kate does that."

For more information about Imp's documentary, go to beautybeneaththedirt.com.

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