

## Expeditions of Empowerment

### #FLX2ADK Trip Report

by Danielle Ohlson, Co-Founder and Program Co-Director

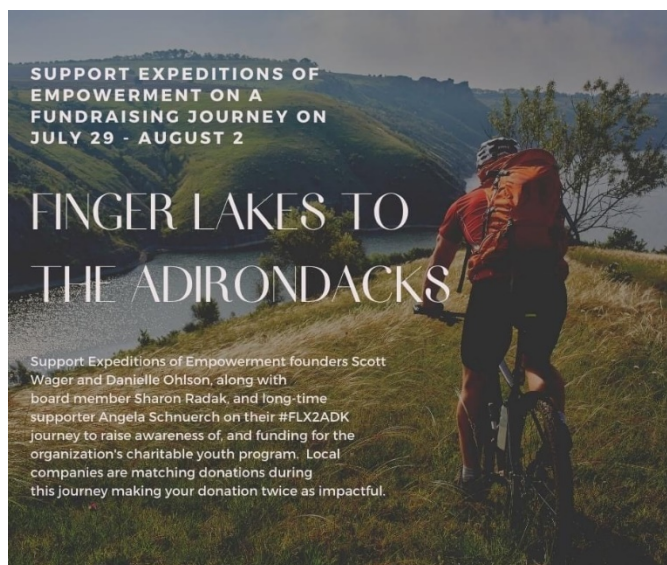
Expeditions of Empowerment is a non-profit organization that provides high-quality outdoor adventure and social-emotional coaching programs for at-risk and under-resourced youth in the Finger Lakes Region. Expeditions of Empowerment is operated and supported by socially conscious outdoor enthusiasts who also happen to be highly accomplished athletes.



As competitive athletes, 2020 has been tough for us. We are used to having milestone events punctuating our calendars, “A” races, and tangible goals to strive for. We are accustomed to intentionally designed, weekly training plans that provide the structure and routine necessary to perform our best. We thrive on the anticipation of these events. We crave the excitement of race day, the exhilaration of crossing the finish line, the euphoric sensation that follows a maximum effort.

This spring, as we received email after email announcing the cancellation of our events, we realized we needed to shift gears. If events couldn’t be provided for us, we would need to create our own. That’s how the #FLX2ADK expedition was born.

Motivated by Xerox’s announcement of their generous offer to match employees’ charitable fundraising up to \$1000, we conjured up a “Sea to Summit”-style journey to our favorite place, the High Peaks Region of the Adirondacks. This would entail longtime friend (and Xerox



employee) Angela Schnuerch and I riding our bikes almost 300 miles from the shore of Canandaigua Lake to the base of the Seward Range, and then hiking to the summits of Mt. Donaldson and Mt. Emmons, two 4000+ ft. peaks included on the Adirondack “46er” list. To raise funds, we used social media and local news outlets to promote the event, and people sponsored our journey by donating to Expeditions of Empowerment. We also received an offer from locally owned company, Finger Lakes Extrusion, to match

up to \$1000 of funds raised!

We had our goal, and trip preparation commenced. We completed long training rides to build endurance, hill repeats to prepare our legs for the elevation we would tackle, and strength and agility training to give us the durability and power we would need to churn out four consecutive days of big efforts. Additionally, logistics needed to be planned: choosing the safest and most scenic bike routes, scoping out rest stops and campsites, meal planning, packing, coordinating arrival times between the riders and support vehicle, troubleshooting and risk management. After a final meeting to hash out the details, we were finally ready!

### Day one, July 29: Canandaigua to Altmar, 120 miles (bike)



Feeling fresh and excited, Angela and I launched our ride from the north end of Canandaigua Lake at Kershaw Park.

We were blessed with perfect weather conditions- mild and overcast, which was a treat after consistently training in 90+ degree heat leading up to the event. We even had the good fortune of a tailwind!

The route was mainly flat to rolling and we easily cruised our way from Canandaigua to Seneca Falls. There, we picked up the Erie Canal Trail, which took us to our first rest stop in Camillus. Along the way, we accidentally took a wrong turn on the back roads of Brutus after misreading a road sign. Bonus miles!

At the rest stop, we enjoyed a great lunch provided by Expeditions of Empowerment president (and SAG Wagon Extraordinaire), Scott Wager and his AmeriCorps staffer (and class of 2020 Newark High



School graduate) Kaelah Joseph.



After Kaelah snapped a few photos for documentation, we were off to Altmar...in the rain. Looking to the southwest, we could see ominous storm clouds. I hoped that they wouldn't catch us as we headed northeast, winding our way through the Syracuse area on back roads and through parks, avoiding major highways and traffic. The rain increased steadily for the next hour or so, but visibility remained decent and there were no signs of lightning. (Later we learned there were tornado warnings in the Finger Lakes area!)

As we headed further north towards Oswego, the skies cleared and we were greeted with sunny blue skies, which dried us out, and made us thirsty! We stopped to refuel at a gas station and realized just how hot it was in the sun. We slugged down sports drink and Coke and carried on to our day one destination- a friend's house in Altmar. Of course, the last ten miles included some steady climbing, but the roads were lovely and quiet. The beauty of the scenery helped ease some of our saddle fatigue, but after 120 miles, we were definitely ready to be done for the day!

We met Scott and Kaelah, set up tents, cleaned up and headed into town for dinner at the Altmar Hotel. A delicious burger, fries, and beer was the perfect way to end day one. Bellies full and legs tired, we called it an early night and retreated to our tents.

## Day Two, July 30 Altmar to Seventh Lake, 95 miles (bike)



We rose early, and Scott made a hearty breakfast of oatmeal, eggs, and coffee. We packed up our tents and got ready to cover the next leg of our journey. We filled our water bottles, stuffed our jersey pockets with our nutrition provisions, and checked tire pressure. After recording a short video to update our followers, we mounted up and hit the road.

We continued to be taken with the beauty of the route as it wound through the quiet, remote roads of the Tug Hill Plateau. Lulled by the scenery and steady turnover of our pedals, we contentedly cruised along, lost in our own thoughts until disaster (almost) struck. Seemingly out of nowhere, a large, hostile dog charged from its yard and began chasing, hard. Experience has taught me that while most dogs who chase cyclists just want to play, some are intent on attacking. This one was the latter. Its menacing, growling, teeth-baring aim at my leg indicated to me that I was in peril. Fueled by adrenaline, I poured on the power, mashing my pedals in a full-tilt sprint until the dog gave up the chase and retreated. He then stoically stood in his front yard, eyeballing Angela (who was about 50 yards behind me and had seen the whole thing) daring her to ride by. She and I had to wait him out until he got bored and trotted off behind his house. Angela then took her chance and rode up to me. She told me that while we were waiting for the dog to stand down, a neighbor had informed her that the dog was a known biter and had already attacked people, including her husband and the UPS driver!

As we continued along, processing what just happened, ANOTHER dog lunged out and gave chase, driving us into the opposite lane. We yelled at it as we hammered the pedals to get away, and thankfully, it gave up far more quickly than the first dog. Nerves frayed by both encounters, we devised a plan for our protection moving forward. We would continue to ride a bit apart, and when we approached a house, we would sprint to get a head start on any other loose dogs who were intent on chasing us. The plan worked well, and when the third, and final dog chase incident of the day occurred, I was able to safely get away from the dog, and yell back a warning to Angela.

Despite the rogue dogs, we had an incredible ride. The weather was sunny and mild, we still had our tailwind, and our rest stop point took us to the beautiful town of Booneville, where we were greeted once again with fabulous lunch fixings provided by Scott. As we sat in the shade in the town's lovely central park square, friendly townspeople stopped to say high, ask us about our journey, and wish us well. Much love to Booneville!

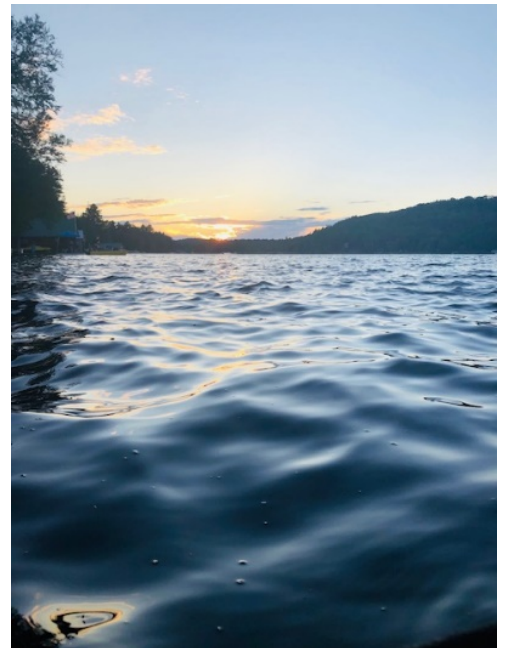


The second half of the day's ride took us into the



Adirondack Park via Moose River Road between Booneville and Old Forge. The road was incredible, winding us through beautiful forestry along the spectacular Moose River. From Old Forge, we had less than an hour's ride to get to our lodging for the night, a friend's house situated on beautiful Seventh Lake!

Upon arrival, we promptly traded our cycling kits for swimsuits and took a refreshing dip in the pristine water. After some lakeside relaxation with Scott, Kaelah, and our gracious host Ken, we gobbled down some pizza and wings and again, called it an early night...but not before capturing photos of the gorgeous sunset.



### Day Three: Seventh Lake to the Seward Range (65 miles)



Eager to begin our final day in the saddle, we previewed our route and noted that we would be doing a substantial amount of climbing as we headed towards the High Peaks Region. The upside to a route with ample elevation is that it always provides spectacular scenery, and this day did not disappoint. Lots of stops for photo ops!

Our halfway point took us to Long Lake, where we convened with Scott and Kaelah at the Adirondack Hotel parking lot. The hotel staff was incredibly welcoming and invited us in to use their facilities, even though we weren't patrons!

After lunch, we threw our legs over and got rolling on our final push to the base of the Seward Range. Again, we passed breathtaking scenery along the Raquette River approaching Tupper Lake. The day was quite literally picture-perfect, and the best part? No dogs!



Scott and Kaelah met us on the last two miles of our ride and followed us in the van to our wilderness campsite on Coreys Road. We found the perfect spot tucked in the trees to accommodate all our tents and gear. We made quick work of setting up camp so that we could reward our day's effort with a swim in the picturesque Middle Saranac Lake.

That evening, we were joined by Expeditions of Empowerment Board member, Sharon Radak, who would be joining us for the next day's hike. Scott prepared a



scrumptious meal of pasta, sausage, and sautéed eggplant. We discussed the route we would be taking for our trek, and Scott showed Kaelah (green in the ways of Adirondack High Peak hiking) how to read the topo map to help her better understand the rigor of the elevation and terrain we would be traversing.

After storytelling around the campfire to bring Sharon up to speed on the past three days' adventures, we once again hit the hay early in preparation for a big day in the mountains.

#### **Day Four: Summits of Mt. Donaldson and Mt. Emmons (17 miles)**

The temperature and humidity were on the rise for our fourth and final day. We made sure to fill our water bladders completely and pack filtration devices for anticipated refills. As we prepped our hiking packs, Kaelah expressed both her excitement and nervousness about the day ahead. This would be her first High Peak climb, and by far the most epic adventure she had ever undertaken. She was also nursing a latent knee issue from a past biking accident. None of us knew for certain if Kaelah was going to be able to make it all the way up the mountain, given her knee's tendency to give out on her and her untested aerobic endurance.

Angela led our group and set a steady, yet conservative, pace to help Kaelah manage her effort and not burn out too quickly. We coached Kaelah on how frequently to eat and drink, and she was able to maintain energy and stave off a glycogen "bonk." She let us know when a hot spot was forming on her heel and Scott showed her how to apply moleskin to the irritated area to prevent a painful blister. Kaelah was in absolute awe of the trail and all its beauty. It was a gift to witness her joy.

As we got to the steeper part of the hike that involved some rock scrambling, with a little bit of instruction and encouragement, Kaelah was able to navigate the technical parts, despite her achy knee, and she was thrilled!

We climbed steadily up to the summit, and when we got to the top of Mt. Donaldson and stood in the clearing, taking in the view, it was endearing to see Kaelah soaking it all in. She was exuberant, exclaiming how beautiful it was, how excited she was, and how proud she felt to have overcome the challenge of the hike to reach the reward of making it to the top. In my mind, this is what life is all about!



We ate our sandwiches and enjoyed the view, took pictures and video to share with our followers, and listened as Kaelah earnestly established a new goal for herself- she would become a 46er and summit all the High Peaks! She so badly wished to join Angela, Sharon, and I as we continued on to climb Mt. Emmons, hungry to add another peak to her list, but Angela had a question for her, “How do you feel right now?” To which Kaelah replied “Great!” Angela responded, “Excellent. That means it’s a good time to head back down!”

We explained to Kaelah that when you are a novice hiker, it is easy to overestimate your endurance and get into trouble. When you’re at the top of the mountain, you’re only halfway done, and in many ways, descending is more difficult than ascending. Given her knee issues, the heat, and the fact that she still had to hike 7.2 miles back to the trail head over tricky terrain, we helped her to accept the plan. Scott guided Kaelah back down the mountain while Angela, Sharon, and I headed over to Mt. Emmons.





The heat was really cranking as it was midday, sunny, and there was no wind (not common in the High Peaks). Sweating profusely, we made our way over to Mt. Emmons and back, and then began our descent from Mt. Donaldson. We stopped to filter water from a stream that cut across the trail and continued down at a steady, conversational pace, enjoying each other's company and the magic of being in our favorite place- the Adirondacks.

When we reached the trailhead, we met up with Scott and Kaelah, who had arrived just minutes before us, and recapped the hike. Kaelah validated the decision for her to forgo Emmons when she admitted her knee began to really bother her about halfway down. She also shared with us her feelings of frustration and fatigue along the descent, but how she willed herself to persevere and push on through the discomfort to finish. We were all so proud of her incredible effort and impressed with her insightful reflections!

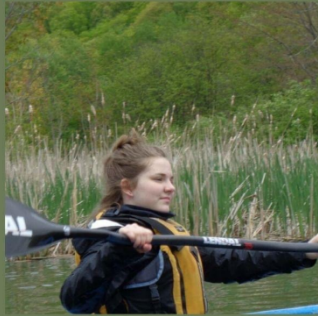
The next stop was Middle Saranac Lake for a much-needed cool-down and cleansing, and then on to the village of Saranac Lake for a celebratory feast of Mexican take-out enjoyed while sitting outside by Lake Flower.

Over s'mores and a campfire, we reflected on the trip and all the memories we created. We laughed and reminisced, we commiserated and contemplated. This is the magic of outdoor adventure. It creates bonds. It builds relationships and connection to nature, to self, and to others. It cultivates confidence and self-awareness. It reveals your strengths and exposes your weakness, then challenges you to overcome them. Each adventure empowers you a little more. It empowers you with strength, and wisdom, and will. It empowers you with the tools to both endure and enjoy life. At its core, this is what Expeditions of Empowerment is all about- providing youth with such experiences.

We wish to express our deep gratitude for all who supported us on this journey and to all who have generously donated to help us continue our programs. To date, we have raised \$1,130. With the Xerox and Finger Lakes Extrusion company matches, we were able to almost triple that amount to \$3,130!

If you are interested in donating, or learning more about our organization, visit [expeditionsofempowerment.org](http://expeditionsofempowerment.org). Follow us on Instagram and Facebook at Expeditions of

Empowerment and check out this testimonial video from one of our current youth program participants! <https://youtu.be/VTuDorKBurg>



### ACCOMPLISHMENT

The feeling of accomplishment from overcoming challenges and succeeding.



### PROBLEM SOLVING

Adapting to what is in front of you and using the tools you have to get through the challenge.



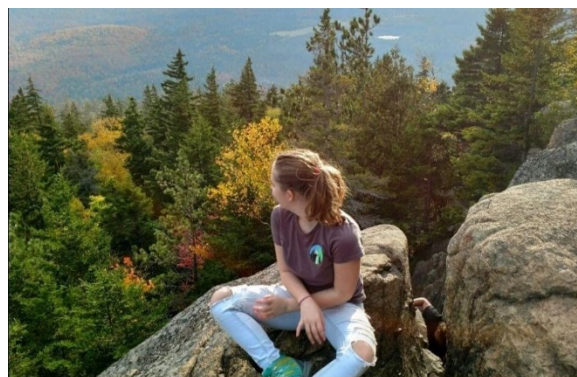
### EMPATHY & ACCEPTANCE

Shared experiences help us recognize what others see and feel.



### INTER-PERSONAL COMMUNICATIONS

Supportive and positive...or cold and miserable? It's not just what you say, but how you say it and how it is received. Clearly conveying thoughts and ideas along with using empathetic listening makes all the difference.



### SELF-AWARENESS

REFLECTION, PERSPECTIVE, SCALE, LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING INWARD