

# Meet Sharon McCarthy - November 2010

By Danny Bernstein

Not all active hikers get their outdoor start from their parents. Some hikers, like Sharon McCarthy, get it from their children.

Born in Lawrenceville in the Virginia Piedmont, Sharon had a rural childhood. And contrary to popular myth, a rural upbringing doesn't automatically lead to hiking and camping. "My parents never hiked or camped. Rural children play outside in an unstructured way," Sharon says.

## Starting in the Outdoors

She went to Virginia Tech where she met her husband, Jim. Work brought them to Charlotte where they raised three children. Like a good mom, she enrolled her first daughter, Meghan, in [Girl Scouting](#). "I knew someone who was involved as a leader so I became her assistant. I wanted to do something to help."



"In second grade which is when my older daughter started, we did lots of arts and crafts. I got the girls outside and camping. First we stayed in cabins at our resident camp. By the next year, we camped in tents."

After three years, Sharon became a Scout leader. "It's hard to have your daughter in the same troop. You don't want to give her special privileges but you don't want to be harsh on her either. Then my second daughter came up the ranks, so I was a leader in two troops. I was a troop leader for 15 years."

But unlike most moms, when her girls graduated out of Girl Scouting, Sharon stayed to rise to leadership roles. She's been a national delegate to conventions, supervised Gold award projects (the girl's equivalent of Eagle Scouts) and has been on a task force for the outdoor properties that the Charlotte Council owns. The Charlotte Council has just bought Camp Oaksprings and is developing the property. It should be ready in five years. She's been a volunteer supervisor for 85 troops involving over 900 girls.

"Now I'm interested in planning and supervising outdoor events," Sharon says. She's formed a dayhiking group for girls and adults that goes out once a month to

various parks and forests. For most girls and adults, it's the first time they've walked five miles and they found it a challenge.

Sharon stresses that as a parent, you can't buy girl scouting. "We don't want money to be a barrier. Any girl can do girl scouting for free, so parents have to be involved." Her son was a boy scout and her husband, Jim, was involved, of course.

## Joining CMC

"I joined CMC because I wanted to hike the Smokies and find partners to do this with." Sharon says. "There were some big changes in my life. I was turning 50, my mom had died, and my youngest child was leaving for college." The last was the most important.

So she looked into doing the [Smokies 900](#) in one year, hiking all the trails in the Smokies between her 50th and 51th birthday.

And this is where I came into Sharon's life.

I was leading a CMC Wednesday hike in the Smokies in the fall of 2007. Sharon emailed me that she was going to camp in Smokemont and wanted to join the CMC hike. There were only four people on this shuttle hike from Newfound Gap to Kephart Prong, so we got to know each other.

When she told me that she wanted to hike all the trails in the Smokies in one year, I may have been the first hiker to tell her seriously that it was very feasible and to go for it. She had never backpacked and I don't think you can do all the trails without backpacking. All Smokies 900 people know about *Day Hiker's Guide to All the Trails in the Smoky Mountains* by Elizabeth L. Etnier but the author depended on a husband who shuttled her.

My cheerleading was not completely selfless since at the time, I had about 300 more miles to go to finish the Smokies 900 and I thought that we could help each other. Before she started her project, Sharon went on a couple of Smokies hikes to learn about backcountry campsites, trailheads, and shelters. She really researched the project.



The next year, on Sharon's 50th birthday, I organized a CMC weekend backpack to take in some remote parts of the Smokies north of Hazel Creek. Hiking Cold Spring and Welch Ridge trails are not easy trails, so her project started with a bang.

For a while, Sharon didn't feel comfortable hiking alone; she imagined bears around every bend. But she's an organizer and a networker. So she went out with Girl Scout leaders, CMC members, friends, and other clubs around the Smokies.

She finally got the knack of hiking alone. Because the Smokies is a network of trails, it requires a lot of planning to minimize repeating trails. We strategized so that we could both get the trails we needed. On her 51th birthday, she finished her project on an easy trail, the Old Sugarlands Trail, with her husband, three children, and many friends.

Sharon works as a free-lance deposition transcriptionist. A court reporter tapes a deposition as part of the pre-discovery process. Then Sharon types the deposition verbatim. "I fell into the job years ago; it gave me the flexibility when my kids were young. Now it gives me the flexibility I need for outdoor projects."

Sharon says "I ask people. What are you doing for your 50th? Don't just go out to dinner. Do something that challenges you."

### **What's Next?**

She wasn't sure what her next outdoor goal was going to be and I made sure I got to her before she committed to something else. "How would you like to do the [Mountains-to-Sea Trail](#), in sections?" She felt it was a reachable goal without being gone from home for a long time.

"The MST goes through so many places. I didn't realize how many places it connects." And then? "I'm working on the [SB6K](#) and I wouldn't rule out an [Appalachian Trail](#) thru-hike. Jim, my husband, is a road cyclist and I'd like to improve my biking. Maybe start on the [Natchez Trace Parkway](#) which goes from Nashville, TN to Natchez, MS. It's flat.

"I miss the Smokies. It's easy compared to hiking the MST and SB6K. I might do it again but not with the same intensity."