

Meet Jorge Munoz

by Bobbi Powers



Jorge Munoz is a garrulous octogenarian. He is opinionated and smart. He earned CMC's 2010 Distinguished Service Award. He also has the courtly manners of a Chilean gentleman, which he is. I recently sat down with Jorge, and we spent a pleasant hour taking a walk down his life's memory lane. His path makes for a "good read!"

Jorge began hiking and camping in Boy Scouts in Chile, near Santiago. His parents sent him to the German School in Santiago where he studied English for 5 years and became fluent in German because all the courses were taught in German. He also studied French but did not like it because of the times – according to Jorge, the French had a "give-up attitude" during WW II and he has never quite forgiven them.

After one year at university, he got a job and started dreaming of travel. A sister in New Jersey invited him to visit her. There he got married and had three children. However, the dreams of adventure continued. The whole family packed off to Germany and spent one year there during Reconstruction. This was 1963, and there were still vast bombed-out areas.

Then the family moved to New York State and began vacationing in the Adirondack Mountains. They all loved it so much that Jorge got a job in a paper mill in the

mountains and stayed there 27 years. During that period, he rode a motorcycle through parts of eastern Canada and hiked with the Adirondack Hiking Club.

Upon retirement, Jorge's traveling "bug" returned with a vengeance. He cycled from his home to the Grand Canyon and then into Mexico where he sold the motorcycle. He flew to Costa Rica which he loved, and from there he headed to Chile where he planned to retire. However, the country's rampant petty crime sent him packing in search of he-knew-not-what. He remembered the exhilaration of cycling over the Appalachian Mountains and booked a flight to Johnson City, Tennessee. He rented a car and toured around for days. One day he was driving along twisty Old 26, and at the top (I'm sure you can picture this spot), he saw the mountains. He told me, "I got a high. I started singing and jumping. I never get a high. I got off at Weaverville and never left."

He joined CMC in 1994 and began hiking with the club. Eventually, he got into maintaining and "took to it." He's still working about 3 times a month with the Monday Crew. He also led hikes for several years and still hikes with the club and on his own once or twice a week. He does his favorite hike, Craven Gap to Haw Creek Overlook, about once a week. He loves it because it is well-maintained, has no noise from the BRP, and it's just the right length. I've been on this hike a couple of times when he's led it, and he often points out interesting trees.

"I love trees!" he said. "I've done the hike to Rattlesnake Lodge about 80 times, but 3 weeks ago I saw a huge oak tree I had never noticed before." He rhapsodized and gesticulated as he tried to give me a sense of its magnificence. Yes, this is a man who loves trees!

He enthusiastically told me about a small, unkempt, family cemetery on the Pump Gap Trail which he adopted several years ago. When he first saw it, overgrown and abandoned, he said, "I felt for it. I can feel the hard times of the people." Since that day, the cemetery has become a personal project of Jorge's. He's made it tidy again. Only one of the stones is carved but was so dirty and mossy that it was unreadable. After much cleaning with a metal brush, the woman's name and dates are legible. He put artificial flowers on the tombstone to honor her. And with the help of friends, he located her and her family through old census records. Because of Jorge, she is no longer unknown and forgotten.

Jorge loves learning. He said, "I always try for physical and mental abilities. I stopped reading novels about 20 years ago." Jorge is a daily patron at the Weaverville Library where he reads the *New York Times* and stays caught up with the world's events. He reads at home too, non-fiction of course. Every Friday an English couple comes to his home to practice their Spanish with him. He serves as Leah Karpen's driver to the many events she attends and learns much from those outings. (Leah is an Asheville philanthropist)

Jorge's father was a professional educator and charismatic orator with a love for learning. I asked Jorge if he considers himself an orator. "Oh, no, no," he exclaimed. However,

when we talked about his concerns for the future, he said quite eloquently, “Keep the family together. That’s most important for children. We must open the windows to them. It’s not easy. But you’ve got to be an optimist. I’m an optimist.” Very well said by an 84-year-old optimist who sounded a lot like an orator to me!