

Meet Lenny Bernstein - CMC President 2006-2007

By Bobbie Powers

I didn't grow up hiking. I spent my first ten years living in Brooklyn. We moved to Miami Beach, FL, in 1951. The only place I could have hiked was the Everglades, which isn't a prime hiking location. But since my family didn't have a car and I didn't get my first bicycle until I was a freshman in college, I always walked – sometimes long distances.

I got my Bachelor's Degree in Chemical Engineering from the University of Florida in 1962 and then went to work for Esso Research in New Jersey for 15 months before going to graduate school at Purdue. Because I had lots of family in Brooklyn, I spent most of my short vacations there. In June 1965, on one of those trips, I met Danny on a blind date. It was love at first sight – at least for me – and we were married on Christmas Day, 1966. Then Danny joined me in West Lafayette, Indiana.

It wasn't until we both started working in New Jersey in 1969, after I finished my PhD and Danny finished her Master's Degree, that we got hooked on hiking. We found the Union County Hiking Club (UCHC), which offered at least one hike each Sunday and also led three-day trips on holiday weekends. In 1971 we took our first trip to the White Mountains, climbed our first New Hampshire 4000 footer and learned about hiking challenges. At that time there were 46 recognized New Hampshire 4000 footers and we decided to climb them all. That project took us most of the 1970s. We later went on to climb the remaining 17-4000 footers in New England and the 35 Catskill 3500 footers in both summer and winter. We were working on the Adirondack 46 when we moved to Asheville in 2001.

While we were doing all this peak-bagging, our lives were moving on. Our son Neil was born in 1973. Our careers were doing well - Danny at Bell Labs and me at Exxon Research. We had told our companies that we would not relocate, but in 1982 an offer came that was too good to refuse. I had a chance to head Exxon's research labs in England, so we moved to Oxford, England, for four years. It was the best job of my career and gave us a chance to hike all over Britain and in several other European countries.

When we returned to the U.S. in 1986, we decided to make completing the Appalachian Trail a life project. Our plan was to finish the A.T. north of New Jersey before we retired and then do everything south of New Jersey as a thru hike after we retired. We modified that plan a bit by doing weekend trips to hike the A.T. in Pennsylvania, but by 1992 we had finished all of the A.T. we could reasonably do on weekend trips, and retirement was still a long way off; thus we devoted most of our vacation time to the A.T. which we finished in 1998.

People always ask, “What did you learn from your A.T. experience?” My usual answer is that I learned the importance of keeping good records. But more seriously, since I hiked the A.T. over the course of 24 years, it’s impossible to separate my A.T. experience from the rest of my life. And as we always tell people, we didn’t find ourselves because we were never lost. (Actually I did get lost once on the A.T., but that’s another story.)

Three years after returning to Exxon, I had the opportunity in early 1989 to work for Mobil’s Corporate Environmental, Health and Safety group. After two weeks on the job, I attended a daylong industry meeting on climate change. I was skeptical of the claims being made for the potential impacts of human activities – that was the oil industry position at the time. Mobil wasn’t particularly interested in climate change in those days, but I was fascinated by the topic and kept abreast of developments as best I could. By 1993 I was convinced that climate change was real and serious. In 1995 I tried, unsuccessfully, to convince the rest of the industry to adopt that position. In 2009 that effort was the subject of a front page *New York Times* article.

Things changed dramatically for me in late 1994 when Mobil got a new CEO who wanted to know more about climate change. I helped prepare a briefing for him. After that briefing, climate change became my most important assignment. I started going to UN meetings on the Kyoto Protocol and joined a variety of industry committees. In 1996 Mobil reorganized and my job moved from New Jersey to Fairfax, VA. Since Danny was now a tenured Prof. at Kean University, she wasn’t going to move. I became a weekend commuter. I enjoyed my job in Fairfax, but not the life style. Then Danny arranged to spend half of 1999 on sabbatical as a visiting researcher at the University of Auckland in New Zealand - we’d vacationed there several times. Five months living in New Zealand with Danny was far more attractive than continuing as a weekend commuter, so I announced my retirement from Mobil.

I expected to be a typical retiree except things didn’t work out that way. In 1998 the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was trying to recruit authors from industry for its next report, due in 2001. Some of my industry colleagues suggested that I become a consultant and an IPCC author. It sounded interesting and that’s what I did. If I was going to be a consultant, I didn’t see limiting myself to this one job, which would be over in three years, so I solicited other work, essentially all related to UN activities on climate change. I continued attending the UN meetings on the Kyoto Protocol. Everything was reasonable until 2007 when a heavy schedule of meetings and personal travel had me away from home for 175 nights. That was ridiculous; by the end of 2008 I was fully retired.

The IPCC was awarded half the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize – Al Gore won the other half. This was a wonderful and surprising event in my life, and for a while I went around saying that I had won part of a Nobel Prize. Unfortunately, that’s overstatement. Officially I can only say that I (and about 7500 other people, including 14 here in Asheville) have been recognized as contributing to

the IPCC's winning the Nobel Peace Prize. I have a certificate hanging in the front hallway of our house attesting to that fact. It has a reproduction of the Nobel Prize certificate, which looks like a Norwegian High School Diploma. Just being associated with a Nobel Prize winning effort is an honor I would have never dreamed possible. And it's led to another honor. In 2009, I was recognized as a Distinguished Alumnus of the University of Florida's College of Engineering.

Retirement hasn't meant a slower schedule for me. I started volunteering for the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) in 2008 and that has grown to be an important part of my life. I'm Chair of ATC's Climate Change and Energy Committee, (www.appalachiantrail.org/climatechange) and a member of their Stewardship Council, which is the group that recommends policy related to the Trail itself. I'm also Chair of the Steering Committee for the 2013 ATC Biennial meeting that will be held at Western Carolina University in Cullowhee on July 19-26, 2013. Put it on your calendar!

When I'm not volunteering, I'm working on my alternate history novel, the story of what happened after Washington's crossing of the Delaware failed and the American Revolution collapsed. It's turned into a multi-volume epic, but it's great fun. Look for it in your bookstore and as a major motion picture in three to five years.

Danny and I joined CMC as soon as we got to Asheville in 2001 and after we got settled, I started going to Council meetings. I was appointed Secretary to fill a vacancy in 2002, then elected Secretary in 2003-4, Vice President in 2005, and President in 2006-7. Since the immediate Past President is a member of CMC's Council, I just left the Council at the end of 2009. The Club is about double the size it was when I joined. That's great but managing a larger, more diverse Club has its challenges. The Council recognized the problem, and in 2005 I headed a task force that rewrote our bylaws and created the committee structure that now does much of the work of running the Club. The changes that we have been able to make without upsetting the Club's membership give me confidence that we will be able to continue evolving in the future.

I started leading hikes in the late 70s. As soon as I felt comfortable with the trails in WNC, I started leading for CMC. I've had many good experiences as a hike leader and only one or two bad ones, all before I joined CMC. The worst was when another popular hike that was scheduled for the same time my hike got canceled and I ended up with over 50 people on my hike. I should have appointed some sub-leaders but didn't know that technique at the time. Trying to keep track of all those people drove me nuts.

My favorite hike in WNC is the Black Balsam to Shining Rock hike that climbs four SB6K peaks. I like it because you are out of the trees so much of the time and have such great views. Being able to pick blueberries at the right time of the year is an extra bonus.

I feel an obligation to do trail maintenance. Danny and I started maintaining a three-mile section of the AT in New York State State in 1988. When we moved here we wanted to continue to with A.T. maintenance and were given a five mile section from Devils Fork Gap to Rice Gap. I also maintain two miles of the MST from Big Ridge Overlook to Beaverdam Gap Picnic Area.

Danny and I have hiked in Canada, Europe, Australia and New Zealand, and in much of the U.S. The place that is first on my list to return to is the desert southwest. We've been there twice and hiked in Grand Canyon, Zion and Bryce Canyon National Parks, but I still want to go to Canyonlands and Arches National Parks. Maybe in 2012.