

# Meet Gary Eblen - May 2011

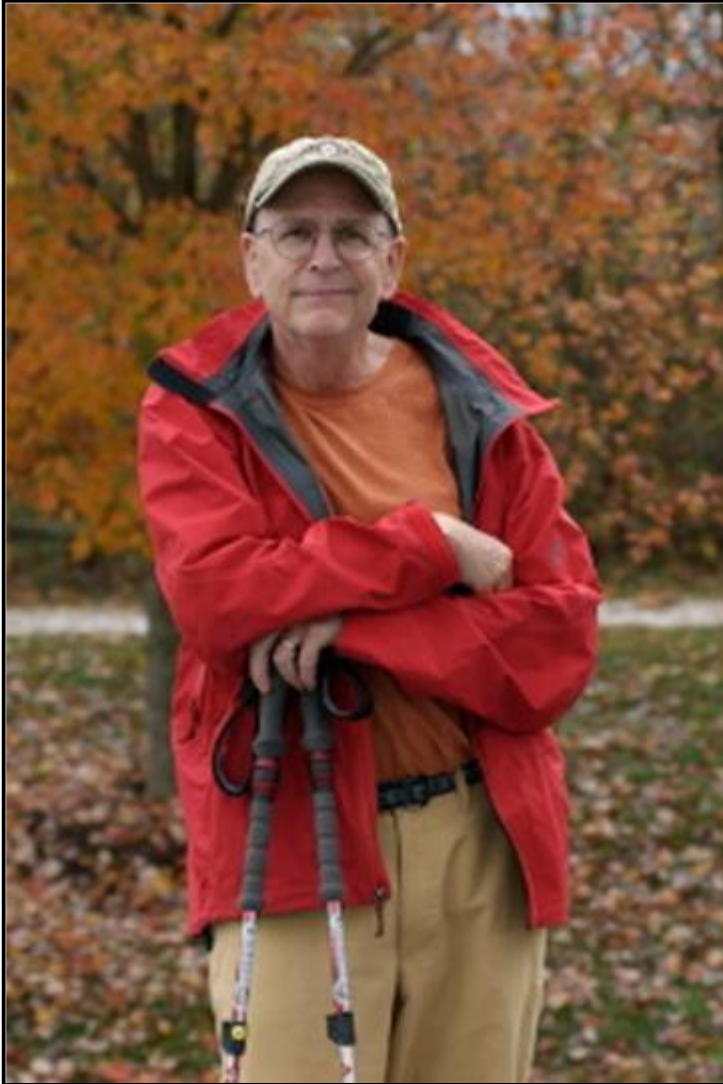
Danny Bernstein

Gary is the voice and face of [Diamond Brand Outdoors](#).

It's not easy to catch Gary sitting but I managed to talk to him just before he went to lead a hike at the Arboretum. Then he was off to a Wilderness First Aid course at Twin Creeks Education Center in Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

"These arboretum hikes show people what's in their backyard," Gary said. "They're aimed at newcomers and long-time residents. The pace is slow and builds confidence to maybe join CMC."

Gary was born in Frankfort, Kentucky, the state capital, located between Louisville and Lexington. Because so much of the economy was dependent on state government, his classmates would change every four years. His family is not connected to the Eblen charities. In high school, tennis was his sport.



## **How did you develop your interest in hiking?**

I was six years old when Davy Crockett came on TV. I had a coon skin cap. Daniel Boone is supposed to be buried in Frankfort. His remains may or may not be there but it was one of Boone's haunts.

In Boy Scouts, we walked the Civil War battlefields. We car camped and slept in shelters. In the summer, we'd visit relatives in Texas and I'd work on the farm but I had a suburban upbringing.

## **How did you get to Western North Carolina?**

I worked at a summer camp, [Camp Mondamin](#) in Tuxedo. The camp was started

by Frank Ball in 1921. I was hired to teach tennis there but this is where I was exposed to backpacking, rock climbing and paddling.

### **And then?**

I roamed. I went to Colorado and led outdoor trips for a gated community. Then I roamed back to Western North Carolina where I started working for Camp Mondamin again, this time year round. I recruited staff and maintained the physical camp. I met my wife, Barbara, at the girls' camp (Camp Green Cove) in 1975. I finally finished college at UNC-Greensboro. Later I took a paddling trip from the Green River to the ocean.

### **How did you get to New York City?**

Barbara is an artist and worked on an MFA at Parsons School of Design. I worked for an outfitter on 46th St., Kreeger and Son. They're gone now. Because of our location, we used to get some famous customers like Charles Kuralt, Tom Brokaw, all the CBS guys. Dustin Hoffman came in the store and everything stopped.



Kreeger and Sons has a [Facebook Fan page](#).

### **But then you came back here?**

I considered my couple of years in New York City as my "year abroad."

I started working at Diamond Brand in 1983. At the time, we had maybe six full-time employees at the Venice store. Our focus was

outfitting the Scouts and offering backpacking equipment and a wider variety of boots than you could get in the area. There was only one other outfitter, Mountaineer South, started by a rock climber; it's no longer in business.

Diamond Brand sewed for a lot of private labels like REI, EMS, and L.L. Bean. We're still doing manufacturing but our retail work has expanded.

I was manager of the store for 11 years. Each day, I kept repeating that the "definition of maturity is intellect over impulse." I'm probably Diamond Brand's senior employee.

I'm the first community outreach person at Diamond Brand. John Delaloye, one of the owners, heard the WCQS program we did on hiking several years ago. It was Tom Bindrim, you (your editor) and me. John liked it and he created the job.

### **Over the years, you must have been involved in a lot of outdoor activities...**

I climbed until our children came. I worked on getting the first hiking trail in Jackson Park in Hendersonville.

I've been on the City Recreation board and Henderson County Recreation Board. I've done a lot of backpacking.

### **So what are your outdoor interests now?**

It's hard to separate my on and off time.

I've been on the [SWEAT crew](#) since 2007. I'm probably the oldest guy there. The SWEAT crew spends a week in the Smokies rehabilitating the A.T.

[For this work and other contribution, Gary was chosen as A.T. Volunteer of the Month in November 2010 ]

I lead a lot of hikes in Henderson County. I'm in the Henderson County Young Leaders Program. We raise money to send kids to camp and pair them up with the right camp. As camp gets more expensive, even counselors come from the upper income brackets.

**When are you going to lead a CMC hike?**

I'm not sure I'd do well leading a CMC hike. I'd be too "Old Testament". To begin with, I'd make a rule that we couldn't have more than ten people on a hike. A hike with 25 people is just no fun.

**I noticed that you're not shy about throwing in a lot of biblical references, even at your Diamond Brand programs.**

I was raised a Baptist. I tailor the religious facts to the audience, like Garrison Keillor.

**If you had visitors who only had one day to hike in Western North Carolina, where would you take them?**

The Black Balsam Loop. You start at Black Balsam parking lot, hike Sam Knob Trail to Flat Laurel Creek Trail to Little Sam Trail over to the MST and take the MST to where it joins Art Loeb, follow both until they split. Then take Art Loeb to top of Black Balsam and down to parking lot on Art Loeb Spur. The views are tremendous.

Another favorite in the Smokies is the Gregory Bald loop from the Twentymile trailhead, hiked counter clockwise up Long Hungry Ridge to the top and down Wolf Ridge Trail. I have done this loop three ways: as a leisurely three day, an overnight, and as a day hike.

**Tell me about your involvement with [Muddy Sneakers](#)**

The program aims to take fifth graders outside to teach the science curriculum. There's a core Muddy Sneakers staff that helps develop curriculum. For example, the kids study the laws of motions for science, map and compass in geometry. I'm the treasurer. We have over 800 kids involved.

[According to their website, one of their goals is "Enriching North Carolina's Standard Course of Study with hands-on learning in pristine forest areas and wilderness sites."]

**And your family?**

My wife, Barbara, is a [representational artist](#). She works in oil and water color. Several paintings are in the Henderson County Courthouse. But the security is so tight that you may have to commit a felony to see some of her work.

We have two children - a son who's getting a math degree at UNCA and a daughter who works for an environmental group in Texas.

**And what's in your future?**

I can see doing this job for the next 10 years. I love what I'm doing.