

Nature vs. Nurture:

Surmounting the odds to solo hike the A.T. in 2015

Lisa Marie Garruzzo

Objective and Purpose

My name is Lisa Marie Garruzzo and I have a story to tell. This is a glimpse into what drove me to a downward spiral, ultimately resulting in being broken into a million pieces and losing any dignity I had. It's a story of what I've endured, as I'm certain many before me and many after me have and will. It's a story about how abominable depression is, how hard it is for people to understand it, and how it almost ended my life. It's a story about how it doesn't matter if you are successful, wealthy, talented, admired, or generous; depression doesn't discriminate and can afflict any of us. There's no reason for who or why, it just is, and it doesn't go away just because you want it to. It's a story about love, defeat, happiness, utter sadness, opportunity, misfortune, success, demise, and appreciation for all of the above.

My objective is to hike the Appalachian Trail in its entirety (2,180 miles) starting February 28, 2015. The intention of this proposal is to obtain support for my venture in whatever form may be offered, whether it be in product (gear, equipment, food, etc.), financial, or moral, and also as a vehicle to spread awareness about the harsh reality of depression and how devastating it can be.

I'm not doing this hike to discover the meaning of life, nor is it a journey in self-realization, as that has already come to me. I'm on a mission to do something that I would normally have never had the drive, energy or time to do. This is my attempt to create a fulfilling life and will be a travelogue of my adventures in doing so.

Throughout this year, I've found peace, sanity, and resolution while section hiking the trail with friends. I've met many wonderful people along the way, mostly thru-hikers, who have been a source of encouragement to head out on this venture alone.

I'm doing this to achieve something I would have never thought possible. I want people to know that success shouldn't be defined by other people's criteria. You are truly successful when in your heart you know you did something, whether it be big or small, that makes you look back with pride and say, "yeah, I did that". More than that, it is something that you did against the odds and in spite of those who told you that you couldn't do it.

About Me

I was born on November 25, 1972. I grew up in a small rural town in Orange County, NY, named Washingtonville. My parents divorced when I was around 5 years old, and with my younger brother, I was raised by my father and paternal grandmother for a while. When I was around 8 years old, my stepmother came into the picture along with her daughter, who was a year older than me. I graduated high school and started working after summer break in 1990; I did not attend college. This part of the story is not out of the ordinary by today's standards. What is out of the ordinary is the chain of dizzying events that constitute the past 8 years of my life.



The ordinary and unexceptional

As I mentioned above, I lived a pretty ordinary life. As a college non-graduate, my job options were limited; however, I managed to obtain a pretty good position with a company in NJ. I had a knack for computers, which then kick-started my career in Information Technology. At the time, in the eyes of my family, I was achieving some sort of greatness by doing this. Along with accomplishing this feat, I met and married a very eligible bachelor. He was smart, had a Bachelors Degree in Electrical Engineering, was good looking, and had a bright future. What a catch! Nothing like the 'losers' I had dated up to this point. We planned on having a family, a house, a few cars -- the American dream.

At some point though, I grew weary of my average existence and felt that I could do more. This was not a sentiment shared by my family, whose constant reminders that I was not a college graduate, and insistence that I should be happy with what I had, gnawed at me like a growing cancer. In addition to the erosion of my spirit caused by my family, the elitists at my company only reinforced the fact that I was cursed to a life of insignificance, since I apparently had reached a plateau on the corporate ladder due to my lack of degree.

In addition to my work-related frustrations, my husband traveled extensively for work, which was negating the pre-marriage agreement to decelerate his work schedule. As a result, we didn't have any children at this point. This is a principle that I held fast to for the benefit of our offspring, having two parents present during their childhood. So by now it's been 5 years since we've been married and we're depriving our parents of grandchildren. We've been busy though, working, buying a house, and 'making a life for ourselves'.



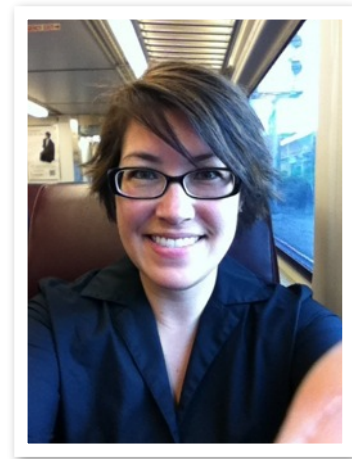
2007 - 2008

Proving them wrong

I made a decision to leave my mediocre job regardless of the fact that I didn't have anything else lined up. Of course, this evoked an outcry of disapproval from my family, because I was "crazy to leave such a good job". I must say that my husband was completely supportive of this and I am ever grateful for his understanding and encouragement.

I did some consulting for a few months, making a much better hourly salary than what I was making, while doing the dreaded task of looking for a new permanent position.

Fortune smiled upon me and I landed a job with a global banking firm. Not only did I land a job with the bank in their IT Department, I was offered almost double the salary I was making at my previous company. Well, I guess I showed them all.



2008 - 2011

Proving them wrong...again

While I was working at the banking firm, my recruiter reached out to me regarding a position with a prestigious company that required someone with a very special set of skills. Since my expertise in the IT realm spanned multiple areas of discipline, they felt I was a good candidate. I applied for the job and went on a plethora of interviews over a span of 5 months. Looking back now, I realize that this was an indication of the dysfunction of the IT Department in this company, but at the time, I didn't think anything of it; I assumed this was normal practice in the corporate world. Eventually, I was offered the position and to my surprise -- and even more surprising to my recruiter -- was offered \$10,000 above what I was asking. I was now going to be making well above double what I was making at my first company. I went to work for the luxury jewelry retailer and made a name for myself. I survived three department re-organizations and held four different positions with various groups within IT. I guess I showed them all, again.

The beginning of the end

I was transferred over to yet another department within IT for the luxury retailer that required me to work out of the New York City corporate headquarters. My commuting schedule was cruel and unforgiving. Although there was a train station not too far from where we had our home, the door-to-door travel time was almost 3 hours one way. It was grueling and I decided, at one point, that enough was enough: We needed to find a place closer to work. We ended up buying a second residence so that I could cut my commute in half, which now required a mere 3 hours total out of my day, a big improvement from the 6-hour chunk.

My husband still travelled for work, many times erratically, which made planning any recreational activities impossible. There were many times where I ended up going to engagements by myself or canceling, because he ended up having to fly out somewhere on a day's notice.



The stress at my job was increasing. Constant changes in the IT organization, as well as a change of command with a new CIO taking over, demands on all groups within IT were broadening. I was constantly sick physically, not to mention the emotional toll that my job and my personal life was taking on me.

My husband and I were growing apart, basically strangers, essentially living separate lives. We still didn't have any children due to my unrelenting adherence to my vow to not have children that would be raised by a single parent.

While my career had skyrocketed, the level of stress working in IT for a large corporation brought to light some unmanageable symptoms of depression. I had started on antidepressant medication in 2008 and had been increasing

dosages as well as adding additional antidepressants in order to effectively manage the symptoms. Looking back now, I realize that I had gone through my life with the sickness, but I was easily able to manage it. However, circumstances being what they were now, I had a depressive episode that resulted in an attempt on my life and three months of medical leave from work. I eventually was able to return and resume my 'normal life', which now included regular psychotherapy sessions. At first, I went weekly and then after I stabilized a bit, was able to reduce to once a month.

The beginning of the end...continued

Then the unthinkable happened:

My grandmother passed away in February 2013. She was my

anchor and a source of strength and inspiration. My grandmother

played a special role in my life, being there after my mother left. It

seemed my brother and I were always with my grandmother while we were growing up. She taught us

right from wrong, how to be respectful to others, how to appreciate one another, how to try to find the good in people, and most importantly, how to be true to

ourselves. She was the one who taught me that sometimes you don't get what you want, but you must still believe that everything happens for a reason. I was

there in her final moments. To see this woman who had so much strength finally give in and let

everything go just tore me apart. If I could pinpoint the moment where my life was irreversibly changed, it was this moment. I felt like just a shell of myself after that event. I struggled on through my again mundane existence for the next 7 months, slowly unraveling, disengaging.



I was living in existential crisis, going through the motions of life. I wasn't really alive and unfortunately, was far from being dead. I still wanted more out of life, but didn't know what that 'more' was. My monthly psychotherapy sessions had by now increased to every other week, which made me feel good for a few hours, but then after the jolt of rejuvenation wore off, I was back to feeling pretty lousy overall.

It was on September 27, 2013 that I decided something had to happen. This static state of being was slowly suffocating me. It was after receiving a text message from work around 10:30pm that something in me broke. As I tried to turn on my computer to log on to the company network, my brain just stopped working. I, after being in IT for a total of 15 years, didn't know how to turn on my computer. As I panicked, it just came out of my mouth like a flood of water released from a dam: "I think we should get a divorce."

My husband just sat back, agreed, and the next day he was gone. He moved out, taking all of his personal belongings with him. I had returned from a visit with my girlfriend to find the place void of all that was my husband. I stayed in the condo, while my husband lived at the house. There is so much more to this story...but this was it in a nutshell. I couldn't understand what just happened.

Although we didn't file for separation or divorce, my husband was on a mission to get rid of the house. He said he couldn't sustain living there and said that the house must go. In my attempt to lessen the blow, I agreed that he could have the house, the majority of its contents, and the proceeds from its sale, while I keep the condo and our savings. †

† see addendum

February 2014

The end

In December, my husband sought out a real estate agent to sell the house. By the end of January 2014, I found myself purging our home of all of its contents. Since my condo is the size of a postage stamp, I needed to acquire a storage space. There were only a few items that I insisted on keeping, so I made a list.

Just when you think things can't get any worse, they somehow find a way of doing so. My first visit to collect my belongings from the house was devastating. Apparently, my husband had a 'moving party', inviting his entire family to participate. I walked into the raided home and could only equate the feeling with being raped (yes, I know what that feels like, but that's another story). I was utterly violated. His family had gone through all of our belongings, picking anything of value to keep for themselves. I didn't realize that 'making a list' meant that anything not on that list was up for grabs. I, too, recruited some family to assist with the purge, although I regret making that decision. It was just as traumatic as having 'his side' sift through my belongings, like a bunch of vultures descending on a freshly killed carcass. Whatever I couldn't fit in my storage unit, whatever my husband didn't want to take with him, it all went in the garbage. In the end there were four dumpsters worth of 'garbage': 15 years of my life going to the landfill.

Then came the day that I thought I would be prepared for; the day of the closing on the house sale. As I started on the 45-minute drive to the attorney's office, I realized that I was not prepared. I would never be prepared for what was to happen.

It was Tuesday, February 18, 2014 and the weather was utterly dismal. It was a reflection of how I felt inside. It was cold, windy, and snowing heavily. Even if the weather wasn't as bad as it was, I still wouldn't have been able to see the road clearly. Tears streamed down my face in an unending torrent of saline. I didn't even try to choke back the howling sobs that emanated from my soul. It was on that drive that I devised the plan to end everything. I had taken all that I could stand and wanted it all to be over. I had fallen into a deep, dark abyss in which no light could be let in.

I planned on taking a 'trip'. I didn't care where because it didn't matter. I just needed an alibi so that I could have someone take charge of my three ferrets. Then I would pick the highest bluff that I encountered on one of my hiking adventures and would sit in silence before taking my final few steps in this life. That was the plan.

I finally reached the attorney's office, arriving at the same exact time as my husband...and his parents. This was the first time that I saw his parents since we separated. Awkward doesn't even cover the magnitude of feelings that I experienced. I was way past awkward. I don't remember too much, except that I was crying hysterically the entire time. I was so distraught that I couldn't even look the buyers in the face and had to sign all paperwork in a separate room.

I left, walking to my car on trembling legs. I don't know how I made it home, but I did.

‡ see addendum

February 2014

But it got even worse!

I spent the night and next day crying. Luckily, or maybe unluckily, I had planned a leave of absence from work, which started Monday the 17th, the day prior to the closing. Everything happening in my life was more than I could bear, and I decided that I needed to take a mental break before I totally lost it. I did overcome the despair that I felt on Tuesday and made my way to my bi-monthly psych visit, which was on Thursday the 20th.

I had become quite versed in psychotherapy etiquette at this point and divulged everything that happened Tuesday, including ‘the plan’ for putting myself out of this misery. This was the largest mistake that I would make in my entire life.

My doctor essentially ‘freaked out’ and shifted into emergency-mode. Although, I told her that I wasn’t going to go through with the plan, I still did have the feelings of despair and hopelessness. She insisted that I go directly to the emergency room after leaving her office and tried to force a commitment from me. Through tears and choking sobs, I insisted that I did not need to go to a hospital and that I would not make a promise that I had no intention on keeping. I’ve now become a liability. She proceeded to pick up the phone and call 911 and while doing so, tried to obtain my verbal approval for her to do that. I couldn’t believe what was happening. The banter back and forth between us was like a parent trying to reason with a toddler, threats to punish if I don’t behave by the doctor and defiance to comply by myself. Eventually, I succumbed after she refused to relent. It was surprisingly quick for the EMS team to arrive. I thought that any call to 911 in New York City would result in an agonizing wait for help to arrive. Ironically, I suppose, since I wasn’t actually in need of emergency medical services, I would be blessed with almost instantaneous service.

February 2014

But it got even worse!...continued

Some formalities were exchanged between my doctor and the EMTs, but when the two gentlemen stated where they would be taking me, a look of alarm came over my doctor's face. She had intended to send me to NYU Medical Center, however Hurricane Sandy had wiped out their emergency room and they were still in the process of rebuilding. The only other option, due to our location, was Bellevue Hospital. The mere mention of the name 'Bellevue' evoked panic from me. Bellevue is exceptionally well known for its psychiatric facilities, and although it has received numerous accolades in various other areas of emergency and acute care, there is also a negative stigma surrounding admission to the psychiatric ward of the facility that extends back to the 1950s. The hospital seemed to be the dumping grounds for the mentally disturbed not only from New York City, but from places all over the world, almost a wastebasket for maladjusted society. There's so much to be said about Bellevue the hospital, but that is another story. Once the mention of having to involve the police if I didn't go willingly came up, I succumbed and went begrudgingly. The next 10 hours were spent in the CPEP (Comprehensive Psychiatric Emergency Program), a hellish emergency holding area for all of the psychotics, schizophrenics, suicidals, and every other variety of mental disturbance or illness. While stripped of any personal belongings and with no contact whatsoever with the outside world, I awaited my fate, hungry, ignored, and afraid. Eventually, I was admitted after 'freaking out' about being locked up for so long with no explanation of what was going on. I did voluntarily admit myself, thinking that I would have more rights than I would have if I had been involuntarily admitted. I won't go too deep into how broken the 'system' is right now, but I will say that there was no 'treatment' other than being jacked up with zombifying drugs, and that all of the bad stories and stereotypes given to mental institutions are true. My right as a patient to not be held against my will was nonexistent, and I had to agree to a steady stream of drugs in order to get out. Even though I was experiencing all of those awful side effects that take up 99% of those television commercials for antidepressant medications (such as stuttering and involuntary tremors), according to the doctors, the benefits outweighed the side effects, and I had to adhere to the 'program'. I was utterly broken, reaching the lowest point in my life and had lost all dignity. However, I was one of the lucky ones and was released after only 8 days, while some other poor souls had already been there for months.

February 28th 2014

A new beginning

I was released from the hospital. Despite the ordeal and the trauma it caused me as well as my family, it turned out to be serendipitous. I now have a new outlook on life, love, priorities, and the disease that is depression. I have been living, not just existing. I love wholly and fully, with no fear of loss. I do things that have meaning and add to quality of life. I am taking a holistic and nutritional approach to dealing with depression so that I will no longer be dependent on doctors and medication.

‡ see addendum

August 28, 2014

Presently...

I'm almost through with my weaning from meds, although have been experiencing terrible withdrawal symptoms. The pain is so severe that I thought at one point that I might have Lyme disease, but multiple blood tests (including testing a tick) have proven to be negative. By the time I start my hike, I should be completely drug-free. This prospect makes me feel emancipated, but at the same time, I have some concern about the physical and nutritional toll the hike itself will take on my body, as well as some fears regarding depressive episodes creeping back into my life.



Summary & Mission

I'm determined to do this. I have encountered some negativity regarding my plans to hike the Appalachian Trail in its entirety. Reasons to not do it range from concerns regarding my depression and the solitude I'll experience when hiking the trail to the dangers that may stem from animal, and even human encounters.

I am confident and I am going forward with my hike and will again prove everyone wrong. I'm not crazy; I'm determined. As far as work goes, I have some money saved up to get me by until after my hike is complete and after that, well, I'll figure that out. But one thing that is certain: I will not be returning to the corporate IT world. I will not revert back to the way it was and welcome in any of those factors that led to my demise.

Since support from the usual sources (family and friends) is limited, I'm reaching out to other sources, such as you, to assist in my endeavor and also to restore my faith in humanity. I find that people will generally not go out of their way for anyone, whether it be someone close (as I found out throughout my Bellevue ordeal) or a complete stranger, however I've also found that sometimes all it takes is to ask. I'm asking for anything that you may be able to give: product, gear, equipment, food, funds, or perhaps just a venue to help me in my endeavor to be inspirational and motivational to others.

Thank you for your time and consideration!

In good health, Lisa



‡ see addendum

February 2015

‡ **Addendum**

Since the writing of this vignette, there have been some developments. I'm completely weaned off of my medication and am heading out for an adventure of a lifetime. My husband and I have reconciled and he decided to join me for the first part of my Appalachian Trail thru-hike. What else is there to say, except that life is good and I'm a lucky person!