



our  
neighbors  
feature

200  
DAYS  
2,193  
MILES



## Broad Run grad completes Appalachian Trail

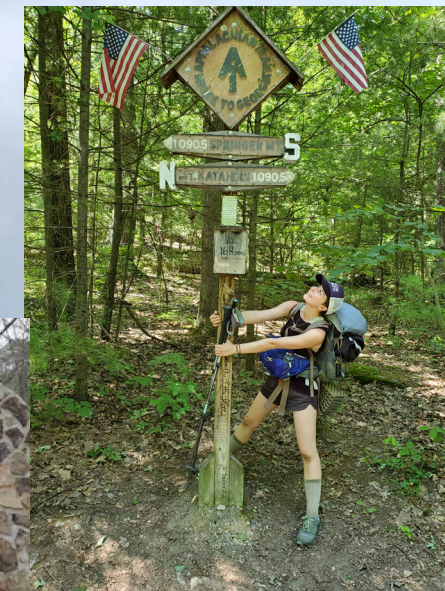
BY JILL DEVINE

**H**iking the entire Appalachian Trail is something many people muse about as a “bucket list” item, something to daydream about. But Sierra Wharton turned that daydream into a reality. On Sept. 28, the Ashburn native climbed Mount Katahdin in Maine, stretched out her hand and touched the iconic sign that marks the trail’s northern terminus.

“I made the final climb and then just stood there staring and sobbing for a few minutes before I could bring myself to touch it,” Wharton said.

Wharton, 25, completed the 2,193-mile journey in exactly 200 days. To reach Mount Katahdin, she hiked through 14 states, from Georgia to Maine. The Appalachian National Scenic Trail — AT for short — is the longest hiking-only footpath in the world. More than 3,000 people try to “through-hike,” or complete, the trail each year, but only a quarter of them actually finish.

**(Left) Sierra Wharton celebrates atop Mount Katahdin in Maine, after completing the Appalachian Trail; (below) Wharton seen at the stone arch in Georgia that marked the start of her journey; (right) Wharton regularly posed for photos along the trail to mark the many memorable moments she experienced.**



### WHEN ONE DOOR CLOSES

Hiking the AT was not always in Wharton’s plans. Less than two years before reaching Mount Katahdin, she was fulfilling her life-long dream as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ecuador.

“I had been preparing to serve in the Peace Corps since high school,” said Wharton, who attended Mill Run Elementary, Eagle Ridge Middle School, and Broad Run High School in Ashburn.

She was hired by the Peace Corps before graduating from John Cabot University in Rome, Italy, in 2019.

Wharton’s ambitions crumbled in March 2020 in the midst of the worldwide response to COVID-19. She had just completed 10 weeks of Peace Corps training in Quito, Ecuador, and was about to be stationed in the city of Guayaquil when bad news came — the program was canceled, and the volunteers had to go home immediately.

Within 24 hours, all transportation routes were shut down. Wharton’s group caught the last flight out for American civilians.

“I was heartbroken,” she said. “Once I realized the gravity of the situation, I knew we weren’t going back anytime soon.”

During the shutdown, Wharton worked at Blend Coffee Bar in the Broadlands. “I thought about the AT while at the coffee shop,” she said. “It finally sunk in just how much life had changed, so I decided to just take a walk while the world was ending.” →







## INTERESTING CHOICES

Aside from a two-day backpacking trip with her brothers a few years earlier, Wharton had little hiking experience, and even less equipment. Her training consisted of AT blogs and YouTube videos.

“I bought my gear at REI just two days before I left,” said Wharton. Her gear list was not typical.

Wharton carried no stove and wore no boots. “I decided to eat cold or raw,” she said. “And I chose Altra brand Lone Peak 5 trail runners, because they are light and dry quickly.” (The first pair of trail shoes lasted 1,400 miles until New York. She is still wearing the second pair she bought on the trail.)

Most surprisingly, she took no tent, opting instead for a hammock with a bug net, a tarp and a sleeping bag. An underquilt

— a second layer for under a hammock to keep warmth in — was added later, when the weather got cold.

Before starting her hike on March 13, 2021, Wharton bought a baseball cap at a thrift shop that had the words “Couch Potato” printed on the front. Other AT hikers liked it and started calling her Tater Tot.

“I wore it every day,” she said. “Everyone has a trail name on the AT, and Tater Tot became mine. Some of the close friends I made on the trail still don’t call me by my real name.”

## HAVE NO FEAR

“I was a little nervous, but those nerves were definitely planted by other people,” she said about her decision to hike alone.

“I’m careful talking about fear, because a lot of young women don’t attempt the AT because of the very few horror stories out there that don’t paint an accurate description of the trail. The AT is a very social trail, and anyone who harasses someone immediately becomes known to every hiker within 200 miles, and the response by the hiking community to those with a bad reputation is instant.”

Instead of starting at the southern terminus at Springer Mountain, Georgia, Wharton chose to begin where most through-hikers begin — at an approach trail

about eight miles away at Amicalola Falls State Park, famous for the stone arch where many hikers pose for photos.

“Everyone starts out together, and I met many hikers within the first two miles,” she said. “Of course, I was hoping to make friends and meet other hikers, and I did.”

Lisa Ingram, Wharton’s mother, was excited about her daughter’s plans.

“Sierra has always been adventurous and independent, and the timing was perfect,” Ingram said. “It’s usually hard to take six months off from life, and Sierra had no big responsibilities and no pets to worry about. I knew it was a very social trail and that she would make friends.”

Wharton said she worried more about twisting an ankle and having to leave the trail than she did about other people. “I can count on one hand how many days I ended up hiking alone,” she added. “You develop trail families, we call them ‘tramilies,’ and you tend to stay with them along the way.”

Although she never saw a bear and just missed stepping on a rattlesnake near Glasgow, Virginia, Wharton says her scariest experience was when a bull moose was snorting and stomping just inches from a tent she was sharing with a friend in Maine.

“My heart was pounding, and we stayed →

frozen for at least 25 minutes before daring to peek under the tarp,” she recalled.

## **BAD DAYS AND GOOD**

“Some days were harder than others,” Wharton said.

On her fourth night, camping near Low Gap in Georgia, Wharton discovered that her small tarp was not adequate when her hammock flooded during a heavy rainfall. “I was so wet and miserable and was struggling to fix it, but a trail friend, ‘Turtle,’ saw and let me share his tent.”

She soon found a free, bigger tarp left by another hiker at a “hiker box” in Hiawassee, Georgia.

Other challenges included a vicious mosquito attack in southern Massachusetts that left her legs looking “like they had been burned with boiling water, bright red and bubbling with bites.”

And she describes her hike through southern Maine as three days and 40 miles of misery. “It’s a long section of flat granite slabs where it’s very common to fall and get hurt. I had to sit and crabwalk for eight miles, and I went through 72 hours of being so sad and crying.”

Her favorite memories are those she shared with trail friends, such as camping in the White Mountains in New Hampshire.

“The weather at the Whites was perfect, and to camp on Mount Washington and have the utter beauty of that space all to ourselves was amazing.”

Wharton also fondly recalls spending the Fourth of July in Warwick, N.Y., at a drive-in theater that allows hikers to camp on the property. “The whole day was so much fun, playing guitars, filling up on snacks, and watching free movies together.”

Grayson Highlands, near Damascus, Virginia, was another highlight. “It looks like Ireland, and the wild ponies come right up to you and lick the salt off your hands.”

## **THE NEXT STEP**

After reaching Mount Katahdin, Wharton said she and her friends had a good cry before taking some side hikes together, notably the difficult Knife Edge Trail.

“We couldn’t just end it so suddenly,” she said. She traveled with some of those friends to Bangor and Portland, Maine, and Boston before returning to Ashburn.

Her mom was thrilled to host Wharton’s friends at their Ashburn home.

“We had 21 AT hikers visit us over a two-week period,” Ingram said. “Sierra told friends along the way to come see us, and they did. We shuttled some from Bear’s Den, gave them rides to the Metro, helped with laundry, got them haircuts and even helped some find COVID vaccinations. Every bed, sofa and blow-up mattress in the house was used.”

Bear’s Den is a spot on the AT at the western edge of Loudoun County near Bluemont — and a popular spot for Ashburn residents to access the trail.

The next step for Wharton involves leaving the Ashburn community that provided so many opportunities that prepared her for life. Peace Corps plans are unfortunately off the table for now.

In October, she moved to Philadelphia with a college friend.

“As long as my family is in Ashburn, I’ll always call it home, but I’m excited to try new things,” said Wharton, who is job-hunting and considering heading west to hike the Pacific Rim Trail and the Continental Divide. Along with the AT, Wharton says that’s known as the Triple Crown.

“I’ve definitely caught the hiking bug,” she said. “So, who knows what’s next.” 

*Jill Devine is a freelance writer and former magazine editor from Loudoun County who writes for a variety of Virginia publications.*





# The Crochet Lady

Ashburn Farm woman spreads goodwill with her creations

BY JILL DEVINE



“Hey, are you the crochet lady?” It’s a question that Jessica Judkins is asked a lot lately.

“I take my crochet bag everywhere I go, like the pool or playground with my kids, but when people started recognizing me, I realized I must be making an impact,” Judkins said.

Maybe you’ve seen Judkins’ creations. They are the reason she has become something of a local celebrity. She makes detailed crocheted coffee sleeves, which she then gives away for free at coffee shops throughout Loudoun County.

Judkins has become so popular that she was named Best Artist in the 2022 Best of Ashburn contest.

Her cute, quirky sleeves sport a variety of designs ranging from storybook or cartoon characters, such as Harry Potter, Clifford the Big Red Dog or Batman, to pop icons like Mr. Rogers, Bernie Sanders, Dolly Parton or actress Betty White. And some Loudoun residents will stand in line for

hours for the chance to snag one.

## A Crocheted Viral Sensation

Judkins announces her coffee-sleeve giveaways through her Facebook page, called My Charming Colors, which has more than 3,000 followers.

“It’s a bit overwhelming lately, because I can never make enough to give to everyone who wants one,” said Judkins, who moved to Ashburn Farm in August 2020 with her husband, Scott, and their two children, Judah, 11, and Magnolia, 6.

“When I arrive at a shop, the line sometimes is already down the sidewalk. So far, I’ve given away about 2,600 sleeves, but there are always people who are sad when I run out,” she said.

Judkins’ efforts have garnered so much attention that she even got a short write-up in People magazine.

Judkins distributes her coffee sleeves at shops such as Blend Coffee Bar in Broadlands, the Starbucks in Lansdowne and Ridgetop Coffee in Sterling, as well as Lees-

burg’s SimplyBe, King Street and Weird Brothers coffee shops, among others.

Before she became manager of SimplyBe Coffee, Tara Kennedy was a customer in one of those lines.

“My son really wanted a Baby Yoda sleeve, so we got in line to buy a hot chocolate,” Kennedy recalled. “A lot of people were there, chatting about where they had previously tried to get a sleeve. It’s like hunting for hidden Easter eggs – and you want to shout, ‘Yes, I got one!’ when you succeed.”

SimplyBe Coffee employs workers with special needs, so Judkins says it is particularly dear to heart.

“Our employees get very excited when Jess comes to our shop,” Kennedy said. “Her designs are so cute, and the fact that she gives them away for free is inspirational and fits well with our shop’s mission.”

## Encouraging It Forward

Judkins said she got the idea to distribute coffee sleeves in 2013 while sitting in a



(Above left) Jessica Judkins with some of her crocheted coffee sleeves; (above) a collection of Judkins’ “encourage it forward” artwork; (right) a sleeve on a cup of Starbucks coffee, and a page from an issue of People magazine that featured Judkins and her coffee sleeves.





Fairfax Starbucks with her toddler son.

“Judah noticed that the customers waiting in line looked sad, and he wanted to give them flowers,” she said. “I love to crochet, so I decided to crochet coffee sleeves to spread cheer.”

With the manager’s permission, Judkins started distributing about 100 sleeves at a time at that shop, with Judah’s help.

“I attached an encouraging note to each sleeve, and he would hand them to people, telling them that they are special and loved,” Judkins said. “Some people didn’t know what they were and would put them on their wrists, but they did make everyone smile, which was our goal.”

Today both Judah and Magnolia help their mother produce and distribute sleeves in an effort she calls “encouraging it forward,” which differs from “pay it forward” in that there is no exchange of money.

Although her kids are starting to learn to crochet, for now they help with distribution or by writing notes to attach to the sleeves.

Judkins refuses payment or donations of any kind and does not take special orders

“Some people didn’t know what they were and would put them on their wrists, but they did make everyone smile, which was our goal.”

or commissions. My Charming Colors is simply a charitable hobby, according to Judkins, who said she does not intend to apply to be a nonprofit.

“I’m just a fiber artist who homeschools her kids and wants to encourage other people.” Judkins buys most of her yarn and supplies at JoAnn Fabric in Sterling and claims the only payment she will ever accept is the smile on someone’s face.

That desire to make others happy drives Judkins, who described an incident last year when she was grocery shopping.

“I passed a woman who was wearing a Ruth Bader Ginsberg [RBG] shirt, so I left my cart right there and ran out to my van to get one of my RBG sleeves. I rushed back in and tracked her down in one of the aisles, calling out, ‘I’m here to encourage you; you were meant to have this.’ This was during



COVID, so we had to stay far apart, but she took it and started crying, telling me, ‘Oh, my. I’ve been following you on Facebook.’”

Each of Judkins’ sleeves is an original design and can take from 30 minutes to two hours to make (some, like Clara and her Nutcracker are very complex). Although they are free, their value lies in how they encourage others to be generous. When one of Judkins’ friends had a child who died

of cancer, Judkins designed “Harry Potter” sleeves, attaching a note in honor of the child, who had loved that book series.

“I later saw online that because of my note, a person made a donation to an organization devoted to fighting that particular kind of cancer,” she said.

### Special People, Special Sleeves

Shannon Rood, an assistant kindergarten teacher who lives in Brambleton, fell in love with Judkins’ Eeyore design from the “Winnie the Pooh” books.

“It was so cute, and the added touch of his pinned-on tail on the back side of the sleeve really made it stand out,” she said.

Rood’s work schedule always seemed to conflict with giveaway dates, so she mentioned that on the My Charming Colors Facebook page.

“A person named Sunny saw my comment while she was in line at Starbucks. This complete stranger decided to surprise me and pick up the sleeve for me,” Rood said. “It shows how much Jess’ kindness spreads beyond her just dropping sleeves

on counters. It has a trickle-down effect, and I was the beneficiary of both Jess’ and Sunny’s acts of kindness.”

Judkins has given her crocheted sleeves to volunteers at Loudoun’s COVID vaccination clinics and she also started distributing sleeves to school and hospital staff. She created a series of humorous “Trauma Llama” sleeves for employees at Inova Loudoun hospital’s trauma center, and she has distributed sleeves for staff at several Loudoun County Public Schools locations. Judkins is now working on sleeves for school bus drivers.

“Once I drop the sleeves off ... I often do not see the people who receive them, so the best thing anyone can do for me is to post a note on my Facebook page,” Judkins said. “That’s my payment. I just want to know if the sleeves made people happy.”

No need to worry, Jess. The answer is undoubtedly yes. ▣

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**Jill Devine is a freelance writer and former magazine editor from Loudoun County who writes for a variety of Virginia publications.**



# THE AXE FACTOR

## LOCAL LAWYER IS A MASTER IN COMPETITIVE AXE THROWING

BY JILL DEVINE | PHOTOS BY ASTRI WEE

**L**ike most attorneys, Suzanne Bassett flings a heavy satchel over her shoulder when she leaves her office for the day. But sometimes Suzie, as her friends call her, isn't simply carrying a big load of case files to review.

"You never know what a woman has in her bag," laughed Bassett, as she opened it to reveal a gleaming collection of hatchets, axes and knives.

Those eye-opening implements have made it through baggage checks at airports across the country. That's because, at press time, Bassett is the top-ranked female in the World Axe Throwing League. When you include men, she's still No. 53 overall – out of more than 5,000 active league participants worldwide.

### TARGET: ATHLETICS

"I've always been competitive, both academically and in sports," said Bassett, who lives in the Broadlands.

At her upstate New York high school, she was a straight-A student and class valedictorian, and she earned seven varsity letters as a field hockey goalie, softball pitcher and volleyball middle player.

She moved to Ashburn about 10 years ago, graduated cum laude from the American University Washington College of Law and now specializes in food and drug law as an associate attorney for the Polsinelli law firm in Washington.

Bassett thinks her athletic background conditioned her to be good at axe throwing,



a sport rooted in lumberjack traditions that didn't formally exist until the early 2000s.

"I've used my wrists my whole life, controlling slight movements to get a ball to do what I want it to do," she explained. "Understanding how my wrist works and having control over my arm helps me throw accurately."



### A NEW TALENT

An invite to a scavenger hunt a few years ago led Bassett to discover axe throwing.

"I was working late and couldn't go, so my friend suggested I meet with them afterward at an axe throwing place in D.C.," she said. "I showed up in a dress and had no idea what I was doing. A guy handed me an axe and told me to throw it, and I surprised everyone by immediately being pretty good at it."

Bassett started winning competitions in Washington before joining a league in Baltimore.

In 2019, Bassett read about a new axe throwing venue, Axes and O's, that was opening in Sterling. She reached out to the owners about throwing there.

"Watching Suzie throw, I could tell right away, from her form and concentration, that she knew what she was doing," said Tara Hampton, the owner of Axes and O's. "Being a lawyer, Suzie is very persuasive, and she convinced me to start a social league, even though I wasn't sure we were ready. We started with about 12 people, but as pandemic restrictions eased, we quickly grew to more than 50 for the Thursday night league."

### ARMED & READY

Bassett's heavily padded competition bag currently holds nine customized axes and hatchets and a set of knives, although she says she owns about 50 related tools total. Competition disciplines are categorized as Hatchet, Big Axe or Duals, with appropriate rules and tools for each.

"Everyone loves to watch Duals," she said. "It's the most fun because two people throw at the same target at the same time, and sometimes even the best of us screws up and hits each other's axe. There's more fun and chaos at Duals – anything can happen."

Her favorite axes have custom wooden handles created by fellow Axes and O's thrower David Kline, owner of DMV Axes. Because she uses a pinch grip when throwing, Bassett prefers square handles that won't rotate like round handles.



“He just made one for me with a design like the lace on Ruth Bader Ginsberg’s collar,” Bassett said. She paired it with her favorite leather blade sheath that has RBG’s portrait on one side and an image of the Supreme Court on the other. “RBG is my idol,” she said.

### AIMING TO WIN

Bassett has earned a bid to the World Axe Throwing Championships in Appleton, Wisc., in December. She qualified in all three disciplines.

“I take pride that I do very well in a male-dominated sport,” Bassett said. “There are no gender differences in axe throwing. We play in the same leagues, compete in the same tournaments, and I don’t get a handicap.”

Bassett has won or placed in quite a few different tournaments in the past few years. She took third place at the Tilted Axes Spring Fling, a coed WATL-sanctioned tournament in West Chester, Penn., and was the highest ranking woman in that contest. She won second in the coed Rustbelt Rumble in Rochester, N.Y., beaten only by the reigning world champion. And



SUZIE BASSETT  
OFFERS UP SOME

## AXE THROWING ADVICE



**DON'T BE AFRAID TO TRY.**  
Don't be put off by an image of bearded men in plaid shirts. That's not what the community is. There are lots of axe throwing venues so give it a try.

**REPETITION IS KEY.**

Throw and repeat. When you're under pressure at a tournament, you need that muscle memory. Just keep throwing.

**DON'T BE AFRAID TO CHANGE UP SOMETHING THAT'S NOT WORKING.**

A lot of players plateau, but they aren't willing to change a handle or change their throw. That's the best time to try something different.

**DON'T THROW IT LIKE A BASEBALL.**

People try to throw it hard, to throw it through the wall, but you don't have to do that. The harder you throw, the less control you have. People who make the big stage are throwing relatively softly.







earlier this year, she took the title in the Queen of the South competition, a women's tournament in Tyler, Texas.

As a woman in a male-dominated sport, Bassett is breaking new ground.

"Suzie is currently the top-ranked female in our sport, competing in multiple disciplines against anyone that steps up to the line," said Mike Morton, commissioner of the World Axe Throwing League. "[She is] consistently proving that success in axe throwing is not tied to one specific gender."

### GRACE UNDER PRESSURE

Bassett credits her success to consistent practice, her willingness to change her throw or try a new axe as needed, and her ability to channel stress into energy that works to her advantage in competitions.

"Suzie's game is always about what she needs to do with her throw, not who she is throwing against," said Russell Murphy, Bassett's duals partner and boyfriend.

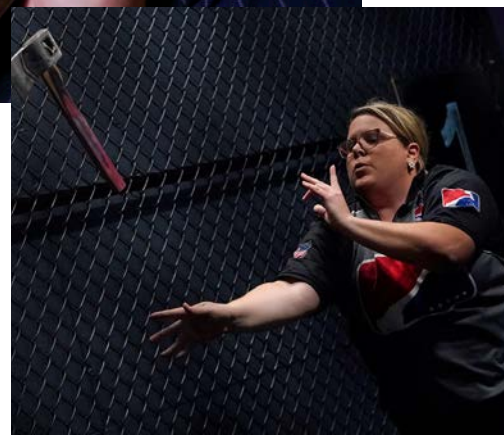
Murphy recalled how focused Bassett was at a tournament where she was competing against one of the top throwers in the



(Left) One of Suzie's axes safely tucked away in a sheath featuring the image of her idol, former Supreme Court justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. (Below) Suzie and a group of fellow axe throwers celebrate a victory in a competition.



PHOTOS PROVIDED



world, Mark Tishko.

"It was insanely close, and they almost threw a perfect game," said Murphy, referring to a score of 64. "Suzie lost two matches to him, but she threw two of her best games – 62 and 63 – in a row."

Prizes aren't usually huge when compared to many other sporting events. They can range from hundreds of dollars up to thousands at major tournaments. Bassett took home roughly \$1,000 in 2021 and, because she has competed a bit less this year, she's taken home roughly \$600 so far.

Fortunately, Bassett says thanks to her day job as an attorney, she has the luxury of worrying less about the cash prizes and focusing more on inspiring her fellow female throwers as well as encouraging more women to join the league and helping them find sponsors to cover costs.

"Most of the time, the men are on the podium. Very rarely do women win any money," Bassett said. "So my goal is to go there and do my best and make a splash for women in the tournament – and make some men nervous." ■

*Jill Devine is a freelance writer and former magazine editor from Loudoun County who writes for a variety of Virginia publications.*