

PERSPECTIVES

REBUILDING WITH RESILIENCE:
WHAT THE A.T. CAN TEACH US AFTER THE STORM

By Tara Wu

BENTON MACKAYE ENVISIONED THE Appalachian Trail as a sanctuary, removed from modern distractions. For those who hike its nearly 2,200 miles, the Trail offers a unique opportunity to find purpose through resilience, community, and self-sufficiency. These lessons can reveal a deeper understanding of what it takes to lead a meaningful life.

Before I hiked the A.T., I was already familiar with minimalism — not by choice, but out of necessity. Growing up in poverty as a neurodivergent woman, I developed resilience and self-sufficiency to navigate life's challenges. However, it was not until my journey on the A.T. that I realized how little I truly needed to feel fulfilled. Self-sufficiency became my strength, while the hiking community provided the necessary support during moments of injury, exhaustion, or mental struggle.

The A.T. taught me fearlessness, but upon summing Katahdin, a new anxiety emerged. I feared that returning to the “real world” would distance me from the grounded self I had found. Would society's focus on wealth and status overshadow the lessons learned on the Trail? In the seven years since my hike, life off the A.T. has shown me that fear is inevitable but can be confronted through self-reliance and community — especially in times of crisis.

From Thru-Hiker to Homeowner

Two years ago, my husband and I bought our first home in North Carolina. After years of transient living, homeownership felt foreign. We chose Asheville for its connection to the mountains and its potential as a base location for trail maintenance and conservation. We purchased a modest home, determined to live simply. At first, we slept on the floor, embracing the minimalist lifestyle we valued on the A.T., but as time passed, building a home felt right. Like golden winged warblers atop a grassy bald, we slowly gathered materials that would make our nest cozy.



*A crew clears trees near Asheville.
Photo by NPS/W. Kinsey*

Our quiet life was interrupted on September 27, 2024. Two evenings prior, Hurricane Helene's precursor storm hit. My husband and I joked about the storm arriving early, unaware of the danger ahead. The night of the storm, we took shelter in our basement. By 5:00 a.m., the power cut out. We were prepared, having learned from our A.T. experience to stockpile supplies, but the storm soon escalated beyond our expectations.

The Strain of Self-Sufficiency in Crisis

The following days were disorienting. We had no electricity, phone service, or running water, and our neighborhood was isolated from the rest of the city. As supplies dwindled, we found ourselves searching for water and propane. Tempers flared as people

fought for limited supplies. The perpetual whir of search-and-rescue helicopters overhead drove home the reality that self-sufficiency alone could not carry us through this crisis. In these dark moments, our neighbors stepped up. Many made dangerous trips across the state to bring back supplies for those who couldn't leave. Their acts of kindness mirrored the camaraderie of trail families on the A.T., showing me once again that self-reliance doesn't mean isolation; it means finding strength in yourself and sharing that strength with others.

**Facing Fear Together:
The Role of Community**

The storm tested both our physical and emotional endurance. The constant search for survivors and victims reminded us of how fragile life can be. Despite the uncertainty, our neighbors' support helped us cope. I found myself reflecting on a lightning storm I experienced during my hike through the Smokies, and the comfort from a communal feast and roaring fire at the shelter later that night. This memory helped me reframe current challenges as part of a larger journey.

In the wake of Helene, lessons of self-reliance and sharing strength once again became clear. After a week, my husband and I were finally able to fill our car with fuel and began volunteering with disaster relief efforts. We worked alongside familiar faces — Appalachian Trail Conservancy and Forest Service staff — who were also helping. From shoveling mud out of downtown Hot Springs to conducting wellness checks on missing persons and completing trail hazard surveys, the spirit of mutual aid that thrives on the A.T. was alive in our region. Even in the toughest of times, the lessons of the Trail endured.

**Rebuilding After the Storm:
A Call for Those Who Love Appalachia**

As the weeks passed, it became clear that recovering from a disaster of this scale would take years. The physical damage from the storm is still devastating. Roads, communities, and forests have been severely compromised or entirely destroyed. Landslides, flooded neighborhoods, and toppled trees serve as a constant reminder: we cannot rebuild in isolation. While self-sufficiency is invaluable in the face of disaster, it is community strength that truly endures. Rebuilding efforts, from restoring trail towns to repairing trails, must be driven by collective strength. Volunteers must also embody patience and compassion, offering both physical and emotional support to those who have lost so much. Rebuilding southern Appalachia requires more than just repairing homes — it calls for restoring the essence of these mountain towns: the people, culture, and deep connection to the land.

Fear is an inevitable part of a crisis, but it is through self-reliance and community that we can face it and rebuild. Whether on the A.T. or in a storm-ravaged town, individual strength is magnified when shared with others. To those who cherish these mountains and communities, please help contribute to the recovery from Hurricane Helene. Whether by volunteering, donating, or offering a helping hand to neighbors, we must all share our strength. In doing so, we will rebuild not only the physical structures of these towns but also the spirit of resilience that makes these communities so special.

Editor's Note: See page 6 to find out more about Tara Wu and page 38 for her article on Hurricane Helene restoration efforts.

SUBMIT YOUR STORY

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We want to share stories of the recovery and rebuilding efforts in our A.T. Communities. Please submit updates and images so we can shine a light on these efforts and encourage additional support.