

# L YOLA



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## ON THE **TRAIL** FOR A CURE

**Erin McShea '02** hiked the Appalachian Trail to help raise awareness of sudden death from epilepsy and support research that may one day lead to a cure.

### MAKING A **DIFFERENCE**

**Timothy S. Wambach '92**, president and cofounder of the Keeping On Keeping On Foundation, is making a difference in the lives of the differently abled.

### ALSO **INSIDE**

**The Rambler Basketball Brotherhood**

Living the Loyola mission on and off the court



MAINE

VERMONT

MASSACHUSETTS

PENNSYLVANIA

VIRGINIA

# More than a WALK in the woods

Erin McShea's epic 800-mile hike along the **Appalachian Trail** to help prevent sudden death from epilepsy and support research that may one day lead to a cure



ON MEMORIAL DAY WEEKEND 2016, **Erin McShea '02** and her partner, Joe Vlasek, arrived at the foot of Mount Katahdin—the highest mountain in the state of Maine. Its rocky peak, which loomed 5,269 feet above them, marked the northern terminus of the

Appalachian Trail, and it was the first of many challenges that they would encounter during the days and months to come.

Parts of the ascent were nearly vertical, and much of the trail was blocked by huge boulders. It would take them 11 hours to summit Mount Katahdin on the first day of their **Endurance for Epilepsy Hike benefiting the Danny Did Foundation**.

It was not a beginning for the faint of heart—even for McShea, a seasoned endurance athlete and former Loyola Academy track and field team member who has completed 16 half marathons, one full marathon and a handful of triathlons.

"It was an eye-opening experience," she acknowledges today. "Katahdin was like a boulder field for the entire ascent, and we made it up the mountain that day by hoisting ourselves up, hand over hand, with 30-pound packs on our backs."

The next morning—bone-weary, scraped, sunburned and sore—they were confronted with their next challenge: the Appalachian Trail's notorious 100-Mile Wilderness. Hikers about to venture forth into this long and lonely stretch, considered by many to be the wildest section of the A.T., as the trail is known to hikers, are greeted by an ominous warning carved into a wooden sign at the trailhead:

*"CAUTION: It is 100 miles south to the nearest town at Monson. There are no places to obtain supplies or help until Monson. Do not attempt this section unless you have a minimum of 10 days' supplies and are fully equipped. This is the longest wilderness section of the entire A.T., and its difficulty should not be underestimated."*

Undeterred by the sign's sobering message, McShea and Vlasek squared their very sore shoulders and strode into the thick forests of the 100-Mile Wilderness. They emerged seven days later, a few pounds lighter and ready to tackle the rest of the trail.

Along the way, they were soaked by rain, scorched by the sun, tripped by tree roots, tormented by biting flies, chased by grouse, dive-bombed by an osprey with a five-foot wingspan and plagued by hordes of mice and red squirrels that chewed incessantly at their packs to get to their food supply. The

GEORGIA

**Erin McShea '02** and her partner, Joe Vlasek, with their Danny Did Foundation flag on the Appalachian Trail (below left) and (below right) with Danny Did Foundation Executive Director **Thomas F. Stanton '94** at the foundation's Evening of Hearts and Hugs gala, where they were honored for their **Endurance for Epilepsy Hike** with a plaque that read: "Thanks for bringing Danny to the mountaintop."







**Erin McShea '02** and Joe Vlasek hiked across six states and scaled 13 mountains to raise awareness and funds for the **Danny Did Foundation**, which was founded by **Mariann and Michael T. Stanton '88** after their four-year-old son, Danny, died suddenly during an epileptic seizure. The name of the foundation—which works to prevent deaths caused by seizures—was inspired by the last line of Danny's obituary, which was written by his father: "Please go and enjoy your life. Danny did."

views were breathtaking, but the trail presented a daunting array of health and safety risks, from poisonous flora and venomous snakes to debilitating parasites such as *Giardia* in their water sources. Physical exhaustion, dehydration, illness and falls also posed constant threats to their well-being.

Whenever life on the trail began to wear them down, McShea thought about her siblings, **Kristin V. McShea '07** and **Justin McShea '04**. The inspiration behind the couple's Endurance for Epilepsy Hike, Kristin and Justin have epilepsy, a seizure disorder that affects more people than multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy and Parkinson's combined—yet receives fewer federal dollars per patient than any of these diseases.

"The obstacles that we faced on the trail were symbolic of the obstacles that Kristin and Justin face every day," says

McShea. "My desire to do something to help them—and others who dream of a seizure-free future—kept me going."

By August, the couple had hiked across six states and summited 13 mountains. But the 800-mile trek had taken a toll on Vlasek, who began to experience health issues. By the time they reached New York, they reluctantly joined the ranks of the roughly 75 percent of thru-hikers who do not complete the entire length of the Appalachian Trail.

But the funds that they had hoped to raise for seizure prevention and research had come pouring in through social media—which Kristin, who serves on the Danny Did Foundation's Young Professionals Board, had used to spread the word about their Endurance for Epilepsy Hike.

"My brave sister and Joe dedicated more than 75 days and nights to their grueling challenge, and it was a huge success,"

Kristin posted on Facebook upon the couple's return to the Chicago area. "To date, they have raised \$5,560. I couldn't be more proud of Erin and Joe for their dedication and perseverance."

"Erin's hike for epilepsy was special because she went outside of her comfort zone," says Danny Did Foundation Executive Director **Thomas F. Stanton '94**, "and that willingness was driven by her love for her siblings. Her commitment to do something difficult aligns with our mission at Danny Did: We elevate awareness around the risk for sudden death in epilepsy, a topic that is hard to talk about. The funds that Erin and Joe raised will help pay for seizure monitoring devices and drive epilepsy awareness and education, giving families access to more resources and more hope. This adventure was a gift in so many ways." ■

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*Erin and Joe need your help to reach one final peak: their \$8,000 fundraising goal in support of the Danny Did Foundation. To donate, please visit [tinyurl.com/epilepsyhike](http://tinyurl.com/epilepsyhike).*