



From The Highlands To The Coastline

It's been a decade of happy trails for hiking attorney

By JOAN LEE

Hartford lawyer Beth Bryan Critton has always been adventurous. She was once a police officer in Wethersfield and served with the American Red Cross in Vietnam.

But about 10 years ago, she began to see the world a different way – on foot.

It all started simply enough. Critton is the mother of four adult children. In 2000, her 18-year-old son hiked the entire Appalachian Trail.

Critton served as his “mail re-supply person,” making sure her son had provisions waiting for him at post offices along the route. “I was intrigued by the idea that someone could hike from Georgia to Maine,” she said.

Intrigued is an understatement. Inspired might be a better word. A year or so after her son's trek, Critton hit the ground walking. “Perhaps influenced by movies like “Braveheart,” she said, “I had a compelling desire to hike in the Highlands of Scotland, and pursued it.”

And just like that, she said, “the whole world opened up.”

Since her trip to Scotland, she's hiked the Inca Trail to the famous ancient city of Machu Picchu in Peru. She's walked along the coast of Cornwall in England and through the rain forests of New Zealand. She's hiked through the canyon country of southern Utah, on California's Sierra Nevada mountains and in the lush Pacific Northwest.

“This August, I will be doing the Tour du Mont Blanc,” she says, referring to a famous 100-plus mile trail that winds through the mountains of Switzerland, Italy and France.

But to hear Critton tell it, the hobby is not about walking. It's about experiencing everything along the way.

“Even the best bus tour does not expose you to the array of sounds heard in, for example, a New Zealand rainforest, the permutations of light and shade experienced on a wooded trail, the opportunity to see wildlife,” she rhapsodizes. “It's very different to walk through a field of wildflowers in the Colorado Rockies than to see them at a distance from a bus window.”

46 Miles

Critton, a land use and municipal lawyer at Shipman & Goodwin in Hartford, works out at the gym during the week to prepare for her hikes.

Even when she's not going to exotic locales, she hikes two or three full weekends a month year-round. “For example, I hiked 46 miles of the Appalachian Trail in northern Virginia this past weekend,” she said in mid-January. Her goal is complete the entire trail by 2016.

Critton is about 25 pounds lighter than when she was younger. But hiking is as much about the soul as the body, she suggests. She calls it restorative and meditative. “I write briefs in my head,” she said.

At one point, Critton was chairwoman of the Connecticut chapter of the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC), an organization that promotes the protection and enjoyment of mountains, forests and trails in the Appalachian Mountains region. In that role, Critton had to give speeches and presentations, which she says helped her grow personally



Contributed Photo

Beth Bryan Critton, a Hartford lawyer and avid hiker, says ‘it's very different to walk through a field of wildflowers in the Colorado Rockies than to see them at a distance from a bus window.’

by pushing her out of her comfort zone.

Critton has succeeded in inspiring others to hike. One of those people is fellow Connecticut attorney Janet Ainsworth, who met Critton two years ago at the Appalachian Mountain Club's Highland Center in Crawford Notch, N.H.

Critton “made the weekend fun by including me in the [hiking] group from the Connecticut chapter when I was a complete stranger,” said Ainsworth. “The one time I did a long hike with her, she hung at the

AFTER
HOURS

back to make sure I was OK because I was lagging behind.”

Ainsworth, who had been involved with the Boy Scouts, said Critton inspired her to become involved in AMC and now leads hikes for that organization, as well as for people at her church and office. “This is getting lots of folks out into the woods, where they otherwise might be sitting on their

couches or in front of their computers,” Ainsworth said.

Critton is no longer formally involved in the AMC leadership, but she is helping to organize an April conference that combines her legal career and her passion for the outdoors. The conference, “Risks, Rewards and Recreational Liability” is aimed at helping outdoor groups minimize accident risk and

litigation exposure during activities such as hiking, paddling on rivers and lakes and maintaining trails.

It’s probably not something Critton would have been involved with before her son made that fateful trip on the Appalachian Trail. “You can tell that it’s something that’s changed my life,” said Critton. “I’m a different person than I was 10 years ago.” ■