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## **RAISING FUNDS FOR GIRL SCOUTS**

# **A year made for hiking**

## **50-year-old will devote most of her weekends to Smoky Mountain trails**

KELLY YALE

Special Correspondent

As Sharon McCarthy celebrated her 50th birthday Friday, she began a yearlong quest to hike more than 1,000 miles in the Great Smoky Mountains in an effort to raise \$20,000 for the Girl Scouts.

A life-long lover of the outdoors and a Girl Scouts advocate, McCarthy will spend almost every weekend in the coming year hiking in the mountains of North Carolina and Tennessee. As the south Charlotte resident raises money for her favorite cause, she also aims to show other women that age is simply a number.

When McCarthy lost her mother suddenly to lung cancer in January 2007, she did some soul searching. Her mother was born and raised in a small town in Virginia and had not traveled much, McCarthy said.

"I think when anyone loses a parent, it causes you to examine your life. I knew that there were things that I did not want to leave undone," she said.

McCarthy had many transitions ahead, including her youngest leaving home. Not wanting to be defined by age, McCarthy focuses on staying busy and maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

This inspired her to plan the greatest challenge of her life: hiking every trail in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Her goal is to raise \$20 per mile hiked, through publicity gained by spreading the word about her Web site -- an effort she has just begun. "I would like to see the funds used for a variety of outdoor programs for girls, including camp scholarships for girls with a financial need, creating a hike group for an underserved population, something as small as transportation for a troop to go camping for a weekend or as big as an outdoor skills day for 200 girls. The amount raised will determine the best use of funds," she said.

Katherine Lambert, who works in the development office for the Hornet's Nest Girl Scouts in Charlotte, has known McCarthy for seven years and understands what this journey means for her.

"This is a wonderful way for Sharon to combine her love of hiking and for the outdoors to an organization she is so passionate about," Lambert said, adding, "I hope it inspires other women to get active."

McCarthy met her husband, Jim, in 1976 during college at Virginia Tech. She has lived in south Charlotte for the past 27 years. The couple have three children: Megan, 24, a Virginia Tech graduate living in Baltimore; Brett, 21, a student at Appalachian State University; and Laura, 18, a senior at South Meck, who will graduate this May and head to Virginia Tech in the fall.

McCarthy got to know Girl Scouting through participating two years when she was in grade school, and as an assistant Girl Scout leader when her daughter Megan was in second grade.

McCarthy remained involved throughout her daughters' lives. Megan and Laura were both Girl Scouts all through high school, both earning their Gold Awards, the highest honor a Girl Scout can receive. At the same time, her husband and son were active in the Boy Scouts and Brett earned his Eagle Scout award.

This weekend, McCarthy has embarked on the first leg of her journey. She hopes to finish 35 miles around Fontana Lake.

Hikers who have completed the trails are known as "900 Milers," and McCarthy is looking forward to being one of them -- though she has calculated 1,000 miles of routes, partially to be a round fundraising number.

She plans to camp out overnight to save money. The Great Smoky Mountains National Park is the most visited national park, and McCarthy feels safe at the campgrounds, she said.

"A couple (of my friends) think I am simply nuts, but what do I want on my tombstone: 'She thought about a great adventure?' " said McCarthy.

Because hiking alone can be dangerous due to the chance of injury, McCarthy plans to meet up with other hikers. She has formed relationships with hikers from the Carolina Mountain Club, a group from Asheville, and the Carolina Berg Wanderers, an outdoor adventure group based in Charlotte. Her hope is to put portions of her hikes on their Web sites. She also looks forward to hiking with friends and other adult Girl Scouts as well.

Her quest also has the added bonus for McCarthy of being able to spend more time with her husband, Jim. An avid cyclist, Jim plans to join his wife on many legs of the hikes.

"While my husband and I are looking forward to being empty nesters together, we realize that a phase of our lives is ending but our lives are not over. I want to be a good example to my adult children that... each phase of life can be a full one," she said.

Said daughter Megan: "I am so proud to tell people about my mom's challenge, because I think it is amazing that even though she is happily married and does so many activities with my father and our family, she still has her own personal goals.

"She exemplifies the very qualities that Girl Scouting aims to foster in women."

#### **More info**

For more information about McCarthy's hike, to follow her progress, or to sponsor her on her quest, visit her Web site. <http://smokyscout.blogspot.com>. Information about the Girl Scouts in Charlotte can be found at [www.hngirlscouts.org](http://www.hngirlscouts.org).

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