

When holidays are stuffed with conflict



Daryn Kagan
What's Possible

And to think things were going so well.

So much to be grateful for.

This was going to be the perfect story to share as we round the corner in this season of Thanksgiving.

For what better to be thankful for than finding love?

Which is what my best friend appears to have done.

The college boyfriend she was married to more than 30 years, the one who left her for his secretary, the one who never treated her very nicely anyway.

Yeah, that one.

He is long gone.

First thing to be thankful for.

Then there is this: Friend found a great guy.

He adores her, treats her like a queen.

They have such fun, share common values.

Or they seemed to.

Until they started talking about the holidays.

For the first time, superstar Beau will spend Thanksgiving with Friend and her family.

This, of course, led to a natural conversation about what do you serve?

A landmine field if ever there was one.

Honestly, it's amazing any relationship gets past combining holiday traditions.

This fairytale love story came to a crashing halt right after turkey.

"And we'll have the casserole dish of stuffing on the side," Friend said going down the list.

"Oh, no, no, Darling," Beau interjected, lovingly putting his hand over hers. "The stuffing goes inside the bird."

Which is how this love affair collided with one of the biggest conflicts in the history of America.

Stuffing vs. Dressing.

There is no bigger divide.

Trust me, Dear Reader, I know you have your opinion.

Beau sees it as juices from the turkey seeping into the stuffing as it cooks, making it moist and giving it actual flavor.

Just the mention of this puts Friend's gag reflex into overdrive, sure as she is that the stuffing will never cook through. She can instantly imagine the salmonella swishing around in her mouth.

Which is where she was when she called me in distress. "Is it possible he's 'The One' for

PERSONAL JOURNEY



Dayton Hikers founder Andy Niekamp hiking the Appalachian Trail. CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

Niekamp completes fifth Appalachian Trail hike

By Ashley Moor
Staff Writer

Dayton Hikers founder Andy Niekamp has returned time and again to the Appalachian Trail, and in August, he completed his fifth hike of the popular trail that stretches from Maine to Georgia.

Overall, during the course of five decades, the Kettering resident has hiked 11,000 miles and spent 1,000 nights and three years just on the Appalachian Trail.

Niekamp, chief adventure officer of Outdoor Adventure Connection, has been a major fixture in the Dayton hiking scene. Aside from section hiking (or hiking the trail in sections rather than from end to end) the Appalachian Trail, Niekamp has completed a thru-hike of Ohio's Buckeye Trail, the 1,100-mile Florida Trail, the John Muir Trail, the Superior Hiking Trail and the Colorado Trail.

In 2011, Niekamp (known as Captain Blue on the trail) wrote a book about his adventures as the first thru-hiker of the 1,444-mile Buckeye Trail called "Captain Blue on the Blue Blazes."

He has always been a hiking and outdoors enthusiast, but he didn't dedicate a large portion of his life to hiking until over a decade ago when he semi-retired from a corporate job at Hewlett Packard during the Great Recession.



Dayton Hikers founder Andy Niekamp on the Appalachian Trail in 1990.

"In a nutshell, I hike because of the inner journey," Niekamp said. "For a lot of people who go backpacking, it's about the outer journey — what they see and where they are — but I go because of the inner strength that I

get — the peace, billowing out the cobwebs, just kind of getting away from my normal life. Every so often I just need to go immerse myself in nature, to get some physically demanding exercise and push myself and get out of my comfort zone. That's where I reap the benefits of hiking."

While many might wonder how a trail could continuously captivate Niekamp for more than 30 years, he claims it's the multitude of terrains and challenges that have him hooked. On each section hike of the Appalachian Trail, he spends a solitary 500 to 700 miles trekking through the Appalachian Mountains and marveling at the sights, mountains, lakes, wildlife and more.

"When I first hiked the Appalachian Trail, and once again, I did this all in sections, it was very difficult," Niekamp said. "But then I realized how much better it was the second time because I knew what I was getting myself into and I was much more prepared. I didn't have this constant quest for new miles. Most people who hike the Appalachian Trail care more about coming home and saying how many miles they did. But then I realized, you know, I didn't have that pressure of having to get it done because I've already done it. And in the subsequent times, when I went

Niekamp continued on **E8**



Andy Niekamp has helped thousands of Daytonians try hiking for the first time. CONTRIBUTED

Niekamp

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back, it just got even better, and then it became like an old friend.”

Throughout the years, Niekamp has experienced many once-in-a-lifetime events while hiking the Appalachian Trail. One of the more perilous experiences occurred during an afternoon thunderstorm in New York when a bolt of lightning hit the ground near him. Though the bolt of lightning did not hit him directly, he says the electricity still traveled through his body. After hiking nearly a mile to get to paramedics, he was evaluated and came back perfectly fine.

Though his frequent hikes as founder of Dayton Hikers provide more than an adequate amount of training for his Appalachian Trail adventures, Niekamp suggests locals looking to hike the Appalachian Trail can train by visiting the Caesar

Creek State Park trails or the Twin Valley Trail near Germantown. Additionally, to get accustomed to the experience of hiking longer distances, he suggests hikers take a large backpack with them on these hikes.

Now that Niekamp has hiked the Appalachian Trail an impressive five times, he has his sights set on conquering other trails such as the Pacific Crest Trail (made famous by the novel “Wild” by Cheryl Strayed and subsequent movie starring Reese Witherspoon). He is also open to penning another novel about his experiences on the Appalachian Trail. In the meantime, he plans to keep busy embarking upon challenging hikes on trails around the country.

To learn more about Niekamp and his many outdoor adventures, visit buckeyetrailhiker.com. To get involved with the Dayton Hikers, visit daytonhikers.com.

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