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Pro Hiker Guides Novices, Enthusiasts

Kettering man starts business venture. He hopes to fill a local need

By [Debbie Juniewicz](#) - Thursday, March 14, 2013
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Andy Niekamp gets some fresh air in Virginia, in the Mount Rogers national recreation area.
CONTRIBUTED

Andy Niekamp wasn't always an avid backpacker — far from it.

As a Boy Scout, Niekamp remembers voicing more than a few complaints while on his first backpacking trip.

“ ‘My backpack is too heavy, why do we have to hike so far, why are we out in the cold’ — I was a typical kid,” he said. “It didn’t dawn on me until later in life, how fun it was.”

Those complaints later gave way to a genuine passion for outdoor adventure. Now, the 51-year-old Kettering resident has set out to share that passion with others.

“There’s sort of an unwritten rule among adventure enthusiasts that once you achieve, you have a duty to inspire,” Niekamp said.

And Niekamp has definitely achieved, as he has logged more than 12,000 miles hiking, including multiple trips along the Appalachian and Buckeye trails. He recently established Outdoor Adventure Connection, which offers guided backpacking and hiking trips. From a day hike to a weeklong trek, Outdoor Adventure Connection can create a backcountry adventure that suits your needs.

“You will go with an experienced professional guide,” Niekamp said. “And my motto is ‘If you’re not having fun, I’m doing something wrong as a guide.’ ”

Learning the ropes

It wasn’t until after Niekamp graduated from Bowling Green State University that he got hooked on backpacking. And, even then, it wasn’t always idyllic.

“On my first solo trip, my pack was too heavy, my feet hurt and I got blisters, but once I got home I really developed a determination and confidence to go back out,” he said. “You are more prepared and more confident every trip you take.”

While Niekamp loved his outdoor adventures, his livelihood came from a career in information technology.

“It was a typical desk job,” he said. “I spent all my vacation time hiking and backpacking.”

After 27 years behind the desk, Niekamp, who founded the Dayton Hikers organization, is excited to take on this new challenge.

“You’ll find a lot of full-time guides in places like the Rocky Mountains, but there is a deficit in this area of this type of business,” Niekamp said. “But Dayton has such a strong outdoor recreation background with all of the MetroParks programs and local groups and organizations, it seems like a perfect fit.”

Backpacking benefits

Many research studies have been conducted in an attempt to quantify how and why spending time in nature can have beneficial effects on physical and psychological health.

Some of the benefits researchers have discovered include lower blood pressure and reduced levels of stress hormones as well as increased energy and vitality.

“Outdoor recreation is good for the body and good for the mind,” Niekamp said. “Hiking and backpacking are great cardiovascular workouts but they also help reduce stress.”

According to Niekamp, increased self-esteem and confidence can also be major benefits for outdoor recreation enthusiasts. And then there is the simple beauty of nature.

“There are some beautiful sights that can only be experienced from a hiking trail,” he said. “So, it’s not just about making the hike, it’s about taking in your surroundings.”

Get packed

Overpacking is usually the rule, not the exception, when it comes to rookie backpackers.

“It’s very common, most people feel like they need to bring a lot of things — too many things,” Niekamp said.

Too many clothes, too much food, too much gear. Niekamp attributes the overpacking, in part, to fear. Those fears could range from fear of getting cold to fear of getting hurt.

“The sum total of the weight in your pack represents your fears,” he said. “When you discard your fears, your pack gets lighter.”

Niekamp tries to put some of those fears to rest as, in addition to his years of “boots-on-the-ground” experience, he also has more than 100 hours of first-aid training, including specialized wilderness first-aid training.

No excuses

“I tell people you’re never too old to enjoy the outdoors,” Niekamp said. “It’s something you can do with family or friends of all ages.”

Outdoor Adventure Connection offers some pre-arranged trips and workshops including an upcoming beginners’ trip to Carter Caves State Park in Kentucky. But if you have a

destination in mind — whether it's the Twin Valley Trail or the Great Smoky Mountains — Niekamp can make that trip a reality.

As winter snow reluctantly gives way to spring flowers, Niekamp is heading into high season for his start-up. And while Outdoor Adventure Connection is a new endeavor for this veteran hiker, his philosophy remains simple and straightforward.

“The No. 1 thing I stress is ‘be safe’ and then ‘have fun,’ ” he said. “That’s what it’s all about.”

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HOW TO GO

What: Outdoor Adventure Connection backpacking workshop and overnight trip

When: March 23-24

Where: Carter Caves State Resort Park, Ky.

Fee: \$60 (includes Saturday dinner)

Description: An easy, one-night, spring backpacking trip for first-time and beginning backpackers. Includes six workshops on backpacking essentials that every backpacker should know. Designed for those with little or no backpacking experience who have always wanted to try backpacking under guidance of experienced backpackers.

More info: www.outdooradventureconnection.com or visit Outdoor Adventure Connection on Facebook