

# Running commentary

By **Charlie Kanzig**  
Correspondent

Driving at five miles an hour on the rutted and bumpy dirt of Road 20 near the California-Oregon border to intercept my 24-year-old daughter Erin and her friend Lani Ulmer on the Pacific Crest Trail last week took all the patience I could muster as I anticipated our reunion after a full year apart.

As we rounded one corner after another climbing slowly and steadily I kept my eyes on the road while my wife Deirdre scanned for the two hikers who had pushed the pace over the previous 11 days to accommodate our plan to join them for a few days on the trail.

Finally, Deirdre spotted the two leaning against their packs at the trail junction and we embraced them despite the fact that they had not bathed in a week-and-a-half and basically appeared like extensions of the earth itself.

When you consider that fewer than 400 hikers complete the entire trail in a given year, taking on the challenge and even getting through California is notable. With a light snowpack and relatively favorable weather this year, the number of success stories may be higher than average. Lani was one of just over 200 hikers who completed the entire trail when she did it the first time in 2010.

The hikers, classmates at Sisters High School since their freshman year in 2004, started on the Mexican border on April 11 and trod more than 1,700 miles over more than 100 days to arrive at this spot. Seeing my dusty daughter gave me a sense of joy and pride beyond explanation. Beyond the trail grime, I saw two incredibly fit athletes with arms and legs toned from an incomparable workout regimen of hiking and average of about 20 miles a day.

Erin ran the Detroit Marathon earlier this year and there is no doubt her level of fitness is well beyond when she toed the line for that 26.2-mile race. They have done some days of over 30 miles and had recently covered well over 40 doing a 24-hour challenge in an effort to meet up with us.

Needless to say the prospect of climbing in the car and heading to Medford for a rest day at my brother-in-law's home felt like a trip to heaven for the two weary

women.

But first, we had to go pick up two more members of "The Fellowship" who had hitchhiked from Etna, California to Ashland in order to join us. One of the two is another member of the class of 2008 at Sisters High School, Blake Ehr, who Erin and Lani had caught up with near Mount Whitney. The other, Clayton, had been traveling with the women for most of the trail and the four-some had become a team of friends.

The young men told us we could find them at Albertson's in Ashland, so we headed down Road 20 toward civilization amid non-stop chatter about what Erin and Lani had been experiencing. With the windows up to keep the dust out, we realized within seconds that we were also keeping the smell in. It is hard to describe the odor other than "pungent earth." Cracking the window improved matters, but once the young men added to the mix, let's just say we were glad it was a relatively short drive to Medford.

Laughter abounded as we drove along. I felt struck by the simplicity of life on the trail and began to sense the attraction of taking on such a quest that requires planning, time, sacrifice, and will, but pays back in ways only the individual hiker could ever completely understand or explain.

With showers and food as a priority, we made our way to Medford in order for the hikers to rest, resupply, and rejuvenate. My wife's brother and his spouse showed tremendous graciousness and hospitality and soon bodies had been scrubbed clean, clothes laundered and stomachs filled. Spending a night inside would be a rare treat after three months outdoors.

This rest stop happened to coincide with a breaking up of "The Fellowship" as Lani needed to move more quickly for the remainder of the trail in order to catch a flight on her way to Australia in mid-September. Lani joined us for one more day of hiking before setting out on her own. The two young men had to hitchhike back south to where they left the trail, but hope to catch back up with Erin before Crater Lake.

My wife and I, along with two of my wife's sisters, Veronica Shean and Holly Akenson, as well

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PHOTO BY JERRY BALDOCK

Sisters veterans met the Tribute to Fallen Soldiers Memorial Torch Motorcycle Ride.

## Bikers pay tribute to fallen soldiers

By **Kathryn Godsiff**  
Correspondent

Groups of riders on large, loud motorcycles tend to attract attention wherever they travel, and a recent group passing through Sisters last Friday was no exception.

The Tribute to Fallen Soldiers Memorial Torch Motorcycle Ride made a brief stop at the Village Green, where local members of VFW Post 8183 and American Legion Post 86 and the Sisters Band of Brothers had posted the colors and were waiting to welcome the group to Central Oregon.

The ride is organized and executed by Tribute to Fallen Soldiers NW, a Eugene-based group of motorcycle-riding veterans whose mission is to ensure that the fallen are never forgotten. They don't just ride along major highways towing a memorial flame. The real mission is to visit the families of fallen military personnel, respectfully presenting them with a distinguished service plaque and a large portrait of their loved one.

The next stop for the group last Friday was Bend, where Wildhorse Harley Davidson

hosted the Fallen Soldiers Memorial Flame for a few hours in the afternoon. The flame then stood vigil overnight at VFW Post 1613. Over the course of the following twelve days, the Fallen Soldiers Memorial Flame will travel 2,500 miles through six states (Oregon, Idaho, Utah, Colorado, Wyoming and South Dakota), honoring 25 fallen soldiers. The final three families to visit live near Rapid City, South Dakota, and Tribute to Fallen Soldiers NW has been invited to present the flame at the 75th Sturgis Motorcycle Rally Military Appreciation Day ceremony on August 4.

The visits to families, called Fallen Soldier Home Visits, take about an hour and have been carefully scheduled in advance. They originated seven years ago as a way to honor the fallen from Oregon. As the reputation of the group grew, they wanted to do more. Three years ago, the multi-state memorial rides began.

Warren Williamson, the managing director of Tribute

to Fallen Soldiers NW said, "Our primary mission is to remind the families that we won't forget their fallen soldier. The number-one thing that the families tell us is that they are afraid that people will forget the sacrifice their loved one made."

The riders take their task seriously, and readily admit that the home visits are emotionally fraught. Richard Gunter, who served in the Navy, has the honor this year of towing the Fallen Soldier Memorial Flame behind his motorcycle.

"I'm honored, and I feel sadness for the families, too. I keep a hanky in my pocket," he said.

The group often finds that word of their arrival in a town precedes them. When this occurs, they are joined by other patriot riders as they make their way to the local VFW Post, where they are provided food and shelter for the night. The spectacle is for the fallen that they are honoring and each rider is humbled to be a part of it.

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