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## The Continuing Adventures of Buffalo and Tough Cookie: Sometimes a Family Goes Deeper Than Blood

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# Continuing Adventures of Buffalo and Tough Cookie

*Sometimes a family goes deeper than blood*

**Janelle Mylott and Dan Szczesny**



WE MET UP IN A SIMPLE RANCH-STYLE FUNERAL HOME THAT looked like an old house. Nearly five years to the day that we finished our epic hiking journey of discovery through the mountains of New Hampshire, we came together on a cool October evening to mourn the loss of Sara Mylott, the woman who started all this.

We are Dan Szczesny and Janelle Mylott (trail names: Buffalo and Tough Cookie), and in 2011 we began a hiking adventure of unexpected depth and length that resulted in our becoming minor celebrities in New England thanks to Dan's book *The Adventures of Buffalo and Tough Cookie* (Bondcliff Books, 2013). It tells how we climbed 52 New Hampshire mountains in one year and six days—in all weather, terrain, and in every free moment.

When this project began, Dan was 45 and Janelle was 9. We were not related but quickly learned that sometimes being a family goes deeper than blood—sometimes it just means caring for each other. Janelle, her twin brother, Aaron, and her grandparents had moved next door to Dan and Dan's wife, Meena, the year before. Our two families got closer. Then in February 2011, Janelle's grandfather died. Then Meena lost her job. We were all in crisis. Meena and Dan started finding connection by taking the kids hiking. Over the days, months, and years, those initial bonds grew deeper and became something else entirely. We became father and daughter.

Sara Mylott, Janelle's grandmother, first saw that connection, gave us her blessing to begin the project, and cheered us on all along the journey. Her passing brought us together again years after our hiking journey had concluded. And in sadness, we were able to think back and consider fully the depth of our adventure.

This summer marks the five-year anniversary of the release of the book that changed our lives, and Sara's funeral gave us the opportunity to reconnect and think about how this all came to pass. In Sara's passing, our journey thus far had come full circle, because it was Sara's own grief, five years earlier, that allowed us to first come together.

In many ways, the yearlong hiking odyssey was Janelle's inspiration. Dan and Meena, just married and newly returned from a trek to Everest Base Camp, packed Janelle and Aaron into their Subaru and drove 100 miles to the White Mountains of New Hampshire. Our first mountain was in Franconia Notch State Park, Bald Peak, an easy mile-long scramble up rock to a

*Dan Szczesny and Janelle Mylott celebrate on North Baldface Mountain, partway through a 14-mile trek over four peaks. COURTESY OF DAN SZCZESNY*



*Janelle Mylott and Dan Szczesny still get together when they can. Here they are in winter 2017 on Mount Major in Alton, New Hampshire.* COURTESY OF DAN SZCZESNY

wide-open summit. The weather held; the views of Cannon Mountain were stupendous; Janelle and Aaron ran and pushed and jumped. They ate candy and trail mix, they got dirty, there were bruises—in other words, it was great.

But Dan was surprised afterward, when Janelle approached him with a request. Could we do that more often? Could we hike again? Dan assured her they could, that they'd arrange more hikes with the kids and coordinate with his wife. But Janelle had other plans: "That's OK. You can just take me."

For Janelle, only 9 at the time and with almost no outdoor experience, the adventure was born from a deeply personal event: the unexpected death of Janelle's grandfather Jim. Sara sank into depression and sadness. Janelle lost Sara in the process of grieving.

As Sara reached out to her neighbors for support during those difficult months, the kids began gravitating more toward Dan and Meena, and the two families started to gel into one. Homework, dinners, and errands became mutual. The two houses began having open-door policies toward each other, and eventually the twins found themselves sleeping over more and more.

By the time of the Bald Peak climb, Janelle, who was desperate to find a way to deal with this loss, suddenly had an outlet in the outdoors, in general, and the White Mountains, more specifically. Here's Janelle:



Being outside was a way to distract myself from my own misery. Looking back on those first few days we shared together in the mountains has made me realize that's when I started to become who I am.

Janelle is 16 now, an environmentalist and an animal lover. Two years ago, she became a vegetarian. That first hike, and a few others in those first couple of months, allowed Dan and Janelle the opportunity not just to explore the outdoors but to experiment with two roles that had eluded both of our lives until then: that of being a father and a daughter.

EARLY IN OUR HIKING JOURNEY, BEFORE WE BEGAN TO TACKLE MOUNTAINS, we found ourselves confronted by police during a small hike near a pond in our hometown of Manchester, New Hampshire. Someone had called to report a strange man and a young girl in the woods alone. When the police arrived, Janelle (remember, just 9 at the time) felt anxious and confused, as Dan tried to explain their situation.

We were walking on a beaten trail with backpacks and water bottles. On one hand, someone was concerned enough to “report” us, presumably with



*The duo stop for the view below the summit of Mount Waumbek.*

COURTESY OF DAN SZCZESNY

Janelle's safety in mind. On the other hand, it was a stark reminder that the adventure we were about to set off on was unusual.

This moment could have ended our hiking adventure before it began, but instead it was a crossroads for Dan, who became a caretaker and father, or at least a father figure. Dan wondered if he would have been stopped had Janelle been a boy. But such a question was not important; what mattered to us was to build both a working, and safe, environment for the two of us to hike.

The situation with the police was sorted out via a phone call to Janelle's grandmother Sara, but going forward, Dan always carried a certified letter from her, verifying guardianship.

For Janelle, something much deeper and stronger grew out of that moment, though it has taken years to see this. Janelle and Aaron's parents were not in their lives. After their grandfather died, Janelle felt surprised when a new adult friend followed through on promises. Here's how Janelle puts it: "Most of my life, I'd been familiar with disappointment and I wasn't expecting much. I was taking a risk and diving into the deep end by learning to trust that he and Meena would consistently show up."

For Janelle, the biggest risk was learning to trust someone again, never mind the challenges of hiking up mountains. "I just assumed we would hike a few times here or there. But then my mind went from, Well, that's something that might be fun but probably won't happen, to, Wow, we are actually doing this."

So, after dozens of little hikes to build our mountain legs and get to know each other, on November 5, 2011, a frigid but clear day, we—Buffalo and Tough Cookie—set foot on Winslow Trail in Wilmot, New Hampshire, and headed up the first mountain on our list, Mount Kearsarge.

The "52 with a View" list was created by a hiking group from Sandwich, New Hampshire, called the Over the Hill Hikers. Back in the early 1990s, the list was fairly obscure. The idea behind the list is that all 52 mountains have a grand view somewhere along the way, whether at an outlook or on top. The mountains range in height from about 2,500 feet to just under 4,000 feet, and they are located all over the state, not only in the White Mountains.

We each faced wildly different challenges. Janelle had no experience following a trail. Here's how Dan puts it: "I'd been all over the world, Nepal, the Grand Canyon, but hiking with a 9-year-old forced me to slow down. Janelle would ask me about tree names or fauna, and I'd have no clue. I had



*Buffalo and Tough Cookie rest on the open ledge of Sugarloaf in Groveton, New Hampshire.* MEENA GYAWALI

to learn right along with her, become more of a naturalist, and it made me a better hiker.”

In the book, Dan calls this micro-hiking. On our hike up Black Mountain in Jackson, the weather was wet and overcast, fog obscured our views, and the trail followed a ski hill—not the most exciting hike. But somewhere along the way, as we sat down in the middle of the trail for a snack, we became a team. First Janelle pointed out a patch of ferns and started talking about them as a forest within a forest, each ecosystem within the larger natural world as distinct and unique.

Here’s Dan again: “I’ve never looked at the forest in quite the same way since our adventures. Being with her made me aware of so much more detail.”

Janelle, meanwhile, knew that hiking one mountain a week for a full year would be hard and would scare away a lot of kids. But hiking wasn’t necessarily about summiting. It became a way to step outside of sadness and put the pieces back together.

Janelle remembers it this way: “Maybe I didn’t logically know it at the time, but intuitively I think I realized I needed outside time, physical activity,

and time with Dan and Meena. All I really knew was that I was sad and angry at the world. But when I was hiking, I wasn't sad or angry."

Hiking for Janelle was like exploring Narnia, that magical world of C. S. Lewis. "When Dan and I hiked, it was like walking through a wardrobe into a snow-covered world full of mythical creatures. Everything was brand new to me, and there would always be an adventure waiting around the corner."

We hiked in every season, in all types of weather (except in thunder and lightning) and at all times of day. At first, Dan carried most of our food and gear, but by the halfway mark of our journey, Janelle was hauling 20 to 25 pounds. Our goal pushed us forward. We were very quickly a team. We wanted to finish the quest in one year, and even when the days shortened and snow fell, we knew we were well on the way.

Then along came a little storm named Sandy and an unexpected test atop a famous mountain.

ON OCTOBER 28, 2012, WE SET OFF ON A LOOP TO HIKE MIDDLE SISTER and Mount Chocorua. We had seen the forecast that Hurricane Sandy was moving north, so we were hustling to check off as many of the remaining mountains as we could beforehand. We were already veterans. Mount Chocorua was to be number 45 of our 52. The wind was heavy and moist with the coming storm, but Dan remembers, "That perfect joy from being up high in the mountains was with us."

There was 30 solid minutes of trail dance as we made our way slowly up Chocorua's bald summit crown. The wind made it hard to hear, but we didn't need to. Janelle led, picking the proper scrambles and negotiating the ledges, so all Dan had to do was stay below in case of a slip. It was even more windy by the time we reached the summit, but nothing we weren't prepared for. What we didn't expect was the hiker at the top who thought kids shouldn't be climbing "adult mountains."

"Guess you're going to be mad at your dad for dragging you up here," he told Janelle.

Janelle didn't answer. Dan tried to laugh it off, saying that actually it was Janelle who usually did the dragging. But the man wouldn't leave us alone. He followed us around, suggesting we leave the summit for a safer place. Dan thought the man's criticisms had ruined the whole day. Not Janelle: "There was something wrong with him, not us."

Janelle was growing up. That encounter and the whole hiking project inspired a new way of life, one of finding new challenges.



During Dan's book talks, audience members often ask, "How did you convince a 9-year-old to hike a mountain a week for a year?" That question implies Dan had anything to do with it. Dan always says a person can drag a child up exactly one mountain. Any more than that, if she doesn't want to go, is miserable for everybody. And Janelle knows climbing mountains brought alive something ambitious that already lived inside her.

Janelle had a deep desire to challenge herself; she set expectations high. She always says, "It's because I want to do things I enjoy and be accomplished in life. I want to live a better life than what was given to me. Even when things are really hard, like now with schoolwork, I make myself do it because I know I can."

Much of that confidence was born out of hiking, and the idea that getting to the top was never the goal. The journey was always the goal.

On November 11, 2012, one year and six days from when we started, we touched the summit of Mount Starr King. It had snowed most of the evening before, and the mountain was heavy and wet. We climbed that day with friends who made an arch out of their hiking sticks near the top so that Janelle could walk through it.



*Over time, Dan noticed a strength of character developing in Janelle.* PETER NOONAN

We covered about 230 miles over the course of the year. We had picked Starr King as the final mountain because it offered a meaningful extra mile: After summiting our 52nd mountain, we continued 1 more mile along the ridge to tag Mount Waumbek, making that Janelle's first 4,000-footer.

The door closed on one adventure, and a door opened to another.

Dan saw a depth of strength that had grown in Janelle. "I knew she had become strong physically, but there was and is something more with Janelle. It wasn't just muscles that were needed to do what she did; there was a strength of character there that I think we often underestimate when it comes to kids."

Janelle's year of hiking was a turning point, a way to come to terms with all the sad changes the previous year had brought, and a way forward. "The way I looked at life began to change for the better."

AFTER WE COMPLETED THE LIST AND DAN'S BOOK CAME OUT, WE SPENT the next year speaking at libraries, schools, and bookstores. We talked about empowerment for kids and how to hike big mountains safely.

One of our favorite events took place in Sandwich, where the Over the Hill Hikers invited us to a potluck dinner and presented us with our own "52 with a View" patches.

We kept hiking, to be sure. Making good on Dan's promise, we hiked on a frozen lake, stayed in the Appalachian Mountain Club's Lonesome Lake Hut, and won a contest in which we became Grape Nuts cereal outdoor ambassadors for a year. We made a memorable hike up Mount Moosilauke, where Janelle handed out little cereal boxes to passing hikers. The New Hampshire Public Television Show *Windows to the Wild* filmed an episode with us, in which, on a memorably rainy fall, we hiked Mount Magalloway with Willem Lange and played with gray jays at the summit. We hiked Mount Tecumseh and Mount Major.

But as Janelle entered middle school and Dan and Meena began preparing for the arrival of a long-hoped-for daughter, hiking began to take a back seat. Janelle joined the track team and started running and competing in the long jump. And as time wore on, Sara, Janelle's grandmother, fell into ill health. The family finally made the difficult choice to move south to Grafton, Massachusetts, where the twins could be with their aunt and Sara would get the care she needed.

This was a hard time for Janelle. "Moving to Grafton made my depression manifest," Janelle says. "Without hiking as a challenge and a distraction, my anxiety and sadness were more prevalent."

In late 2017, as we gathered together to celebrate Sara's life, it occurred to us that Sara was again bringing us together, once again giving us a fresh start. Dan's daughter is walking and talking now and better able to travel. Janelle has straight A's at school with college right around the corner. We're talking about the future. And much to our surprise, it seems bright again.

A few weeks after Sara's funeral, we sit in a coffee shop in Worcester, Massachusetts, talking about ways to move forward, and we discover that hiking, while a means of bonding and tackling a long-term goal, certainly isn't the only way to remain friends and continue to grow our relationship.

We can write together, find crazy food, and take Dan's daughter out on shorter hikes, perhaps at some of the National Wildlife Refuges around New England.

No matter where we go and what we do, we're still Tough Cookie and Buffalo. From our most recent conversation:

Tough Cookie: "My grandmother didn't know what she was getting into when she took me and my brother into her life, but she just welcomed us with open arms anyway. Just like I didn't know what truly mattered until after she was gone, and that was that I gained an everlasting friendship.

"I've decided to push myself to do mentally challenging activities for the time being. And I realize now that it's OK to not know exactly where you'll be down the road and that it's about the journey anyway."

An espresso machine fizzes away behind us. The world awaits us once again. Janelle shrugs.

"I don't know what will happen next, but I'm sure it will be just as life-changing," Tough Cookie says. "And you'll be right by my side, right?"

Buffalo: "Always. How about another smoothie?"

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JANELLE MYLOTT is a junior at Grafton High School in Massachusetts. She enjoys writing, painting, listening to music, and spending time with her pet fish, Blue. She loves to run and hike.

DAN SZCZESNY is a writer and journalist living in Manchester, New Hampshire. His books include *The Nepal Chronicles* (Hobblebush Books, 2014), *Mosquito Rain* (Folded Word, 2016), and *The Adventures of Buffalo and Tough Cookie* (Bondcliff Books, 2013). His newest book, *The White Mountain* (Hobblebush Books), which explores a year on New Hampshire's highest peak, is due out this year.