

WHY DON'T YOU GO TAKE A HIKE?

BLACK MOUNTAIN SHOP IS OWNER'S CHILDHOOD DREAM COME TRUE

By Karen Chávez
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The master plan started about age 7.

Growing up in Arkansas, John McFerrin started coming to Camp Ridgecrest just outside Black Mountain in the early '70s. Even as a child, he was blown away by the beauty of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

"That's where I got my introduction to camping and hiking. I went for six to eight weeks every summer," said McFerrin, now 48. "The beauty, the sounds and the smells worked themselves into me, and I thought one day I'd like to call this place home."

He made his way back to the mountains again and again, and in 1999 fulfilled a childhood dream to live in Black Mountain, opening Take a Hike Outfitters on the right side of the railroad tracks on Sutton Avenue.

The 4,000-square-foot shop, across from the old railroad depot, blends seamlessly into the small-town charm of Black Mountain, with its rough-hewn wood exterior, wood plank floors and welcoming aisles of backpacks and protein bars, SPF-imbued clothing and bug spray, hiking boots and BPA-free water bottles.

"His dream since he was 7 years old was to hike the Appalachian Trail and have his own backpack shop in Black Mountain," said Diane McFerrin, John's wife of more than 20 years.

John attended Camp Ridgecrest in Montreat as a camper and staffer for 11 years. After graduating from Ouachita Baptist University, where he majored in accounting and minored in economics, he decided the best use of his degree was to head back to Western North Carolina and wash dishes.

He worked the kitchens at Ridgecrest Conference Center and waited tables at the Grove Park Inn and the Radisson (now Renaissance) Hotel, all in an attempt to make a living and live in Black Mountain. In the meantime, he ventured out on another lifelong dream — to thru-hike the more than 2,000-mile Appalachian Trail.

In 1989, he started a thru-hike from Georgia heading north, but only made it halfway. He lost so much weight he had to quit around Roanoke, Va.



John McFerrin is owner of Take a Hike Outfitters in Black Mountain. BILL SANDERS/W SANDERS@CITIZEN-TIMES.COM

SOME OUTDOORS SHOPS IN BLACK MOUNTAIN:

» **Epic Cycles, 102 Sutton Ave.** Bicycles and repairs. Call 669-5969 or visit www.epiccyclesonline.com.

» **Black Mountain Running Co., 106 W. State St.** Running shoes, apparel, nutrition. Call 669-7186 or visit www.blackmountainrunning.com.

» **One Fly Outfitters, Ltd., 112 Cherry St.** Fly shop and guide service. Call 669-6939 or visit <http://www.oneflyoutfitters.com>.

» **Bone-A-Fide Bakery & Boutique, 118A Cherry St.** Pet supplies and bakery. Call 669-0706.

» **Take A Hike, 100 Sutton Ave.** Outdoors outfitter, gear and apparel. Call 669-0811 or visit www.takeahikenc.com.

McFerrin began again in 1991 (four months after his wedding) on a solo trip.

"I did the whole thing. I ate a lot more. It took 186 days, which is really slow," he said. "You have to be become really comfortable with yourself because you spend a lot of time with yourself. It was a lifelong dream of mine. It's one of the few goals in my life I've ever been able to achieve."

But with his slow, steely determination, McFerrin headed back to his childhood plan — to open a backpacking shop. He worked at Diamond Brand

Outdoors, where he cut his teeth in retail, specializing in hiking gear and footwear, and worked part time for the now defunct Blue Spruce Outfitters in Black Mountain.

Diane taught at Black Mountain Primary School. When an old antique shop in the heart of town came open, the McFerrins jumped at the chance to start Take a Hike.

John runs the nuts and bolts, and Diane is the main buyer. Their two children, Lillian, 15, and Jacob, 12, who are home-schooled, help with the folding and merchandise labeling and helping customers.

The shop, which shares building space with Epic Cycles, is a natural gathering spot for the town's heavily outdoors-leaning community, for folks stocking up on supplies for an Appalachian Trail hike, or a day hike on the trails of nearby Montreat or the Kitsuma Trail, or even just a walk with the dog around Lake Tomahawk.

It offers most outdoor sports needs, except for paddling, climbing and cycling sports, has clearance prices on dealer samples and serves as an information kiosk on the local outdoors scene. People wandering in asking directions for the best trail or picnic spot or the nearest waterfall are everyday occurrences, McFerrin said.

Susan and Ed Mayer, of Swannanoa, were at Take a Hike recently shopping for some of their favorite outdoor apparel brands, Royal Robbins and Ex-Officio.

The couple harvest wild fruit, ramps and mushrooms, and are always on the prowl for good deals and good-quality outdoor gear.

"When we breeze through town, we like to shop here, and we like to patronize the neighborhood stores," Susan Mayer said.

"It's a great store," Ed Mayer said. "They have more attentive service, and since it's a small store, they are more selective about

what they stock."

John McFerrin said the recession did cause some trying times for the store, but they learned how to reassess what customers wanted and needed, and to roll with the flow.

Take a Hike started an online store and a Facebook page, and McFerrin learned to stock brighter, more colorful merchandise, and expand the women's clothing section.

Diane McFerrin said the family has found its niche in the world in Black Mountain.

"It's so beautiful," said Diane, who enjoys plein-air painting and hiking. "It's a great community with people who care about each other and check in on each other. It's a great place for families, and there are so many things to do right out



TOP 5 PLACES TO RUN OR WALK

- » 1. Lake Tomahawk.
- » 2. Montreat.
- » 3. Black Mountain Recreation Park.
- » 4. Black Mountain Greenways.
- » 5. Downtown Black Mountain.

TOP 5 SCENIC DRIVES

- » 1. N.C. 9.
- » 2. Blue Ridge Parkway.
- » 3. Montreat.
- » 4. North Fork Reservoir.
- » 5. Lookout Mountain, Montreat.

the back door, where you can be on top of a mountain within an hour," she said.

Since he started Take a Hike, McFerrin doesn't have much time for months-long backpacking adventures, but he cherishes every day in the mountains.

"There's not a day that I don't look up at the mountains and thank the Lord I get to live here," McFerrin said. "I try not to take the natural beauty for granted. I love the community and the laid-backness of Black Mountain."

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