

When most of us think about walking our dogs, we don't think of traversing 2175 miles and walking nearly the length of the Atlantic seaboard. But that's exactly what Steve Russell is doing. On April 5, 2010, Steve took his first steps on the Appalachian Trail, accompanied by his two rescued dogs, Sandy and Lizzi.

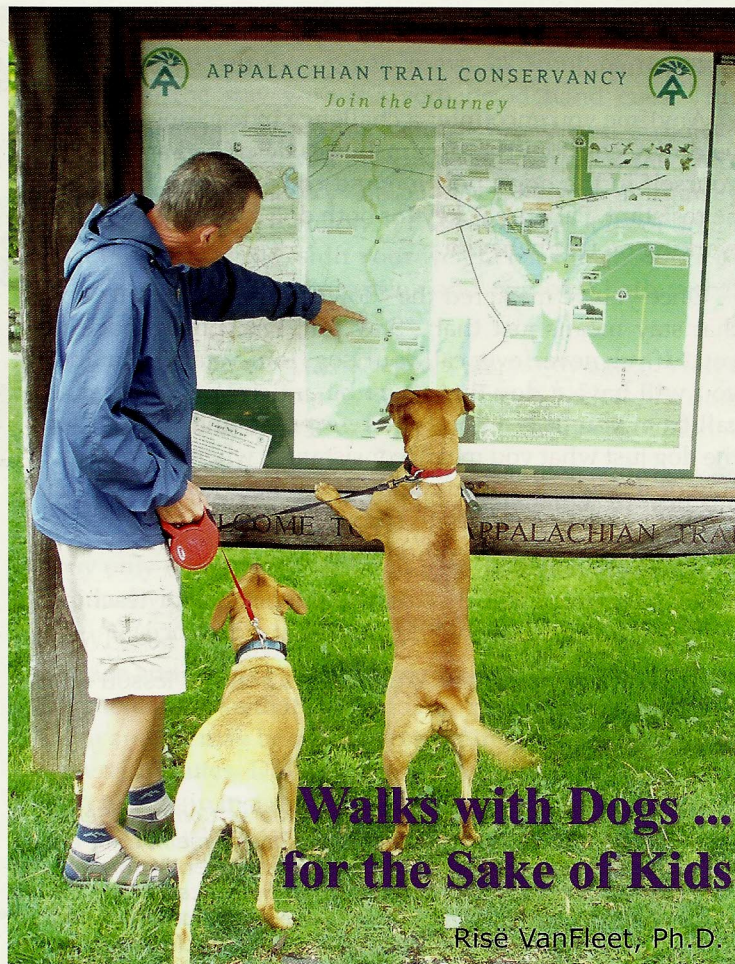
The Appalachian Trail runs from Georgia to Maine through some of the prettiest and most rugged terrain on the east coast. Many people hike shorter segments of the trail, but the so-called "through hikers" continuously backpack their way for the entire distance, usually taking about six or seven months. Steve, Sandy, and Lizzi are part of this latter group, hiking the northern half now, and then the southern half with an expected finish date of November 8, 2010. The Appalachian Trail (AT) runs behind my house and through the small town of Boiling Springs, Pennsylvania, where I live, so I jumped at the opportunity to interview Steve, Sandy, and Lizzi as they passed through our area. I was eager to learn more about the reasons Steve and his dogs have embarked on such a long walk, the child- and canine-related programs that have inspired this adventure, and what it takes to walk with dogs in this unusual way.

Helping Foster Children

Steve Russell is a Florida-based attorney who wants to draw attention to the needs of children in the dependency system (foster or residential care). Most of these children or teens are dependent on their states' protective care systems because of abusive or neglectful family situations, and they are at risk for a wide range of mental health, substance abuse, and social problems because of their histories of trauma.

In particular, Steve wants to support the work of CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) programs throughout the country. CASA volunteers are community members appointed by a judge to represent the best interests of these children in court. The volunteers go through extensive training to learn about child abuse and neglect, courtroom procedures, and advocacy techniques. They then create a relationship with their assigned child, work with everyone involved with the child, and provide crucial information for the court in deciding what is in the child's best interests. This is an exceptionally important program that helps ensure that children get what they really need.

Although figures vary from year to year, nearly six million children are affected by reports of child abuse annually in the United States, and between 500,000 and 700,000 children live in foster care at any given time. Studies have shown that children with CASA volunteers are more likely to be adopted successfully with an appropriate array of support services. The child/family therapy practice with which I'm affiliated specializes in child trauma and abuse situations, frequently hosts CASA meetings, and works collaboratively with CASA volunteers because this program plays such a vital role in the lives of these children. (More information about CASA is available at www.casaforchildren.org.)



Steve's long walk with his dogs was inspired by one foster boy's relationship with a dog. Charlie (fictitious name) was 12 years old, had been in the foster care system for four years, and had one failed adoption. Charlie had many behavioral difficulties stemming from his abuse history, and by the time Steve became involved with him through the CASA program, Charlie had lived with 26 different foster families and attended eight different schools! He had recently spent two months in out-of-school suspension. He was heading down the wrong track, and the system did not seem to be working well for him. At this point, Charlie took part in a school program in which children trained dogs as lower-level service dogs, and he loved it. Steve, who was appointed as Charlie's CASA volunteer and who was training his own dog at the time, found his conversations with Charlie revolving around clicker training and other dog training methods. Notably, Charlie worked hard on his own behaviors and problems because he wanted to stay in the dog training program. Charlie remained in the same home and school for an entire year!

After Steve saw firsthand the positive impact of the dog program, he formed the charitable organization Canines 4 Kids. He saw the similarities between unwanted dogs and these injured, seemingly unwanted children. His programs are designed to bring children and dogs together in the foster care system in ways that benefit both, providing homes for dogs and healing for children. The Canines 4 Kids programs involve preliminary training of the dogs by a dog trainer, selection of the best canine candidates with ➤

