

HIKING A MOUNTAIN OF HOPE

*Stories of how hiking and outdoor recreation
lead to a lifetime of well-being.*

by Gregory A. Miller, Ph.D.
President, American Hiking Society



Kara and Chris Whitely on the summit of Mt. Kilimanjaro. Courtesy: www.fatwomanonthemountain.com

Hiking is the best nature-based activity that can lead to a lifetime of fitness and well-being. You'll hear me say this every chance I get--and I really believe it. While there is an obvious cardiovascular benefit to hiking, we hikers also have fun, connect with nature and find that quiet time with family and friends, bringing us a profound sense of belonging, peace and well-being. I believe we should think of our trails and public lands not only as irreplaceable outdoor recreation and conservation resources, but also as an integral part of our health care system. Hiking is a gateway to healthy lives. With that goal in mind, I want to share examples of inspired, dedicated leadership that blend hiking and outdoor recreation with health and well-being.

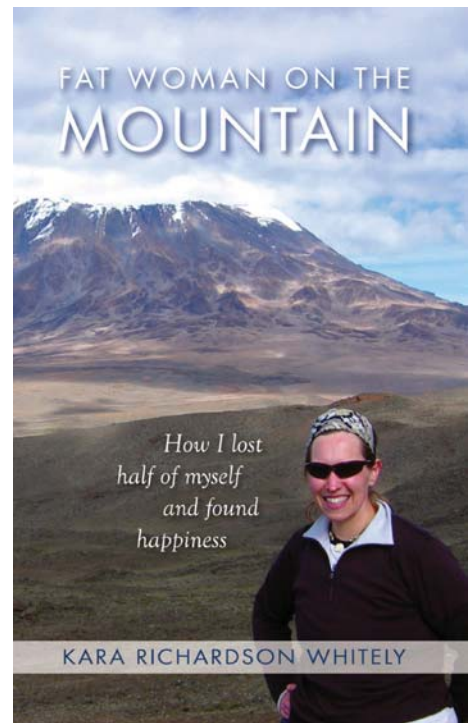
Fat Woman on the Mountain

Outdoor magazines and television programs are filled with the daunting heroics of well-honed, extreme outdoor recreation athletes. However, I'm not one of them and neither is Kara Richardson Whitely, the self-acclaimed 'Fat Woman on the Mountain.' "At age 30, I was lost within my own body. I dreamed of climbing mountains but the only thing that went up was my weight—to about 360 pounds," shared Kara, a wife and mother now living in New Jersey. Rather than focus on the pounds she wanted to lose, Kara looked at weight loss as a lifelong journey and just got moving—she resolved to climb mountains. "Mountain hiking and the path to wellness have a lot in

common" offers Kara, a member of American Hiking Society and the Green Mountain Club in Vermont. "They require tenacity, faith and a lot of hard work." Kara contacted me a few months ago to discuss how she and American Hiking can team up to carry a message of hope and well-being for everyone through hiking—something we're now working on. I am awed at her willingness to lose weight (120 pounds lost so far, and more to go) and more importantly, to incorporate charitable causes as she climbs Mount Kilimanjaro or Mount Mansfield in Vermont, or hikes to the bottom and back of the Grand Canyon.

With great courage and resolve, Kara has just written a book, *Fat Woman on the Mountain: How I Lost Half Myself and Gained Happiness*. Weighing in at more than 360 pounds, Kara began tackling her weight loss challenge on flat hiking trails and soon made her way up and over mountains. "After the recent birth of my daughter, I am still plus-sized but I want to serve as a role model, encouraging people to get active with their bodies and in their community," Kara notes. "I am now training to go up Mount Kilimanjaro for a third time in early 2011 to raise money

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Courtesy www.fatwomanonthemountain.com

for Global Alliance for Africa's AIDS orphan program." Hiking up mountains has served as both a means and an end for Kara and to the many who have been inspired by her to get out

and hike for health--a regular hiker, doing extraordinary things.

Fat Woman on the Mountain, the story of Kara's 120-pound weight loss and quest to hike Kilimanjaro, is available on www.fatwomanonthemountain.com and Amazon.com. Look for a full book review in the spring issue of American Hiker.

Park Prescriptions

In late August, I was invited to Chicago to attend the Obama Administration's Health and America's Great Outdoors conference. During my visit, I spent some quality time with Dr. Daphne Miller, a family physician and associate clinical professor in the Department of Family and Community Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco. Dr. Miller has championed the use of 'Park Prescriptions' as part of her integrated approach to medicine. Together with Dr. Michael Suk, American Hiking board member, Daphne co-chairs a new effort called Health and the Outdoors Partnerships. "I have started to make formal 'park prescriptions' to my patients," noted Dr. Miller. "The prescribing instructions are considerably more detailed than ones you might get with a medication; they include the location of a local green space, the name of a specific trail and, when possible, exact mileage."

Daphne Miller is not alone, as doctors around the country are "medicating their patients" with outdoor activity in nature to prevent or treat health problems ranging from heart disease to Attention Deficit Disorder. Dr. Judith Palfrey, president of The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) noted recently that, "We are encouraging our 60,000 pediatricians to give out official child-friendly "prescriptions" for healthy, active living that should include green exercise like hiking to become healthier and to be restored in nature." And physicians from California to Maine are urging their patients to get outside to hike, bike or paddle their way to health. Communities are also taking to the trails, like Santa Fe, N.M., which launched a 'Prescription Trails' program to target the high rates of diabetes in their populace. The program includes a trail guide that physicians can hand to

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Explore Your Parks event at Seneca Creek State Park, Maryland. *Chris Rief.*

their patients. This is an important first step towards building hiking and trails into a community's health care system.

Let's Move Outside!

Let's Move Outside! is a joint initiative of the Office of the First Lady and the Department of Interior and Department of Agriculture to support and promote physical activity for children and families in America's great outdoors. Coinciding with American Hiking's National Trails Day® in June of 2010, First Lady Michelle Obama launched the outdoor recreation component of her Let's Move! Campaign to end childhood obesity within a generation noting, "We want every child in this country to have opportunities to hike, to get outdoors, to get fit and to lead active lives right from the beginning." She underscored that "Nearly one-third of the children in our country are overweight or obese, which means that they are also at greater risk of heart disease, diabetes and cancer. So, we have created Let's Move Outside! in partnership with the National Park Service, Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management and Fish and Wildlife Service to encourage kids and their families to use the hiking and trail resources available to them."

American Hiking is a proud partner and supports the First Lady's campaign goals through our host of programs including National Trails Day, Volunteer Vacations, Alternative Break, and the newly launched Explore Your Parks partnership program endorsed by Let's Move Outside! In September 2010, American Hiking teamed up with the National Park Trust and Maryland and Virginia State Parks to roll out The North Face's new program, Explore Your Parks, which provides incentives and opportunities for families to learn about close-to-home outdoor recreation resources at their state parks.

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Joe Elton, Director of Virginia State Parks and President of the National Association of State Park Directors remarked, "I've spent a lot of personal time exploring the incredible system of America's State Parks. Without exception, the moment I can remember from each visit is when I meet a fellow explorer who is experiencing a park for the first time. I was honored to join American Hiking in two "Let's Move Outside" events that welcomed hundreds of first-time explorers. Before the hike, nearly 75% of the students admitted they had never been on a hike before. After the hike and a day spent with mentors and volunteers from the park, 100% enthusiastically said that they would urge their families to come back."

Joe Elton and the directors of our state parks believe that the health and future of our parks is deeply linked to the health and future of our nation...and both rely greatly on parks, corporate leaders, not-for-profits, schools and families working together. Elton summed it up this way, "The public-private partnerships that brought these first-time explorers out to our parks for such a meaningful experience are vital—not only in helping citizens experience the outdoors, but also for giving them new motivation and changing the way they view physical activity."

Power of Partnership

America's hiking and trail community needs to take note of The National Coalition for Promoting Physical Activity, a public-private partnership representing hundreds of organizations, which has established the National Physical Activity Plan. This plan merits our attention and support as it includes specific strategies and targets for parks, recreation and fitness. I'm encouraged by this national

plan as there are tactics which identify as priorities enhanced public transportation options to access trailheads and the promotion of physical activity through volunteer environmental stewardship opportunities. This means that the thousands of hours of trail stewardship fostered through National Trails Day, Volunteer Vacations and the variety of trail volunteer programs through the Alliance of Hiking Organizations are benchmarks for the National Plan.

Recently, American Hiking Society announced its new Families on Foot initiative, which will marshal our trail stewardship programs to offer families and youth of all ages and backgrounds opportunities to improve their health and develop an appreciation for hiking, trails and the great outdoors. Our goal is to reconnect children and families with nature and make hiking and outdoor recreation an enhanced part of family life in America. We are proud to work with a nationwide network of individuals and organizations dedicated to preserving and enhancing America's future. Visit our website to learn more about our federal, state, and local government agency and not-for-profit partners' programs and resources to help parents, family members, teachers and mentors engage our children and help them become stewards of America's great outdoors.

Every "trail family" should seek the path to healthier living by increasing their amount of physical outdoor activity through hiking.

To learn more about how to get your family and community outdoors and moving down a trail towards a healthier life, go to www.AmericanHiking.org/Families-on-Foot/.



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