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After major hike, dog comes to the rescue

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"This dog saved my life!"

Sherman resident Harold Reynolds is not joking or exaggerating when he speaks of the role his German shepherd, Blue, played in rescuing him from the darkness of depression.

Only three days after completing a 1,170 mile trek along the Appalachian Trail in July, Reynolds "crashed" into a deep depression.

"All felt lost - I laid down and cried for two days," Reynolds said. "I had feelings of emptiness, loss and failure, knowing I didn't have the strength to do the second half of the trail."

The 60-year-old Reynolds had spent the previous three months completing the first half of a "flip-flop" trail hike. This occurs when, instead of hiking the entire trail from Georgia to Maine, the hiker starts in the middle and proceeds in one direction, then returns to the middle and hikes in the opposite direction.

To complicate matters, when Reynolds returned home, he found that his son, who had been housesitting had brought along a German Shepherd puppy.

"My son acquired the dog while I was gone, and he told me he was moving to Rochester and found out he could not take the dog with him," Reynolds said. "So, I ended up home alone with a dog that I didn't want."

Reynolds fell quickly into what is known as post-hike depression.

"I did not want to do anything. I laid on the floor and the couch day after day, doing the minimum," he said. "I would get up to take care of the dog, then lay back down."

Reynolds said at first, he thought the depression would pass.

"I tried to get through the daily routine. I kept feeling less and less like doing things," he said. "All the while, I had this puppy I didn't want, licking my face."

Post-hike depression is actu-



Sherman resident Harold Reynolds and his German Shepherd, Blue.

ally a very common occurrence with long-distance trail hikers. Dr. Ken Bunning, Coordinator (President) of the Appalachian

Long Distance Hikers Association writes that "post-hike depression is real. It is a combination of physical and psychological respons-

es to ending a long arduous journey."

According to Bunning, "Once on the trail, our brains defer to a new sense of purpose. We make new friends, explore the wonder and beauty of nature, push ourselves to levels of physical exertion many never believed possible... The physical challenges produce endorphins, our bodies natural 'feel good' chemical stimuli. Then it ends.

Post-hike depression is a let-down that produces a feeling of loss and anxiety. The purpose that has driven us for months is gone, so are our trail friends, the way of life, and the endorphins. Stressors such as returning to society, finding a job, and the need for a steady source of income exacerbate our loss. Post hike depression can manifest as bouts of sadness, depression, mania, reckless behavior, and even suicidal thoughts.

See RESCUE, Page A2

RESCUE, From Page 1

Although these are not 'normal' behaviors, they are a common response to the physical and psychological effects of ending our adventure. It can last for months or even years."

Reynolds had all the symptoms of depression, such as not wanting to bathe or eat, but he thought it would pass. However, because he started taking Blue for walks and even to stores that allowed dogs.

By November, Reynolds said he realized he needed help and went to his care provider who came up with a plan to help him.

"All the while, I kept caring for this dog I had," he said. "He was different than all the other dogs I had taken care of."

Reynolds said he wanted Blue to

be trained properly so he took him to CHQDogs in Mayville. CHQDogs stands for Customized, Humane and Quality training and behavior consultation services. It advertises that its mission is "to provide customized reward based training support to dogs and their guardians through the application of modern, humane and science based training principles."

Reynolds said he and Blue began to become more socially active.

"Sometimes this dog and I would go out and just enjoy the day together," he said. "I kept up the guise of going places for the dog, but I was doing it for myself, as well, forcing human interaction."

Blue, who is now 14 months old, weighs 75 pounds and he and

Reynolds spend a lot of time together. Reynolds said he would like to train Blue to pull a cart and he hopes the German Shepherd will be able to accompany him when he completes the second half of his trail hike.

Reynolds said Blue is a very agreeable dog.

"Blue is very likeable and very social, he said. "He likes to meet and greet people, especially children. He really loves children."

One thing is for sure, Reynolds said, no one is ever going to take this dog away from him.

"Blue, that I didn't want, has helped me in a very dark time to see the light," Reynolds said. "This dog saved my life. He gave me the purpose of getting up again."