

How the Trail Saved Tyler “Diva” Cairnes

By Heather B. Habelka



Tyler received his Trail name, “Diva” from his friend “Broadway” at the very start of his A.T. thru-hike. “I’m sassy and I have a tendency to rant — especially when it comes to disrespectful or entitled behavior on the Trail,” he says. “Even before becoming sober, I’ve always believed in being good to people.”

GROWING UP, Tyler Cairnes wasn’t your typical outdoorsy kid. “I didn’t like the beach,” he recalls with a smile. “And up until two years ago, I didn’t know what a trail blaze was.”

Today, Tyler — now thirty-six — considers the outdoors home and is on track to complete hiking’s “triple crown.” He completed his A.T. thru-hike in 2025, will hike the Pacific Crest Trail this spring, and plans to complete the Continental Divide by the end of next year.

His obsession with hiking and commitment to stewarding the A.T. developed later in life but early on in his sobriety journey. “I started drinking when I was fifteen. I was an addict my entire adult life,” he explains. “By thirty-three my liver and kidneys were failing. I would seize in my sleep from withdrawals and had to keep a bottle of vodka next to my bed.”

It was at this point in his addiction that he took part in a five-day detox to ease these symptoms. “The staff, who were recovering addicts, told me I was one of the worst cases they’d ever seen and that I shouldn’t be dying in my early thirties. They urged me to apply for a thirty-five-day rehab program,” Tyler shares. “It took me one week into those thirty-five days to realize what I was doing and what was happening. I was going to drink myself to death.”

Upon successful completion of the program, Tyler attended Alcoholics Anonymous meetings three times a day for nine months. But he struggled, “During my first year of sobriety I was a dry drunk. I was sober, but I was bored and miserable. Drugs and alcohol were my entire life. As a musician I couldn’t be in dive bars.”

Searching for direction and a sense of identity, Tyler turned to the internet. He asked what sober people do. The answer he found? They hike.

So he ventured out onto an 18-mile section of the A.T. just ten minutes from his home in Tennessee. “I couldn’t read a map. I packed only a 12-ounce bottle of water, but I went out alone and completed the section. I didn’t know I had to turn around to get back to my car and had to call my dad to pick me up,” he says. “I couldn’t walk the next day, but I thought it was the best thing ever. Since that day, I’ve never stopped hiking.”

Meeting Angels Off Trail

Tyler used to work in restaurants, but he knew that environment could compromise his sobriety. He landed a job in East Tennessee



Above: In August 2025, Tyler completed his northbound A.T. thru-hike. Below: “I’m grateful for the opportunity to work with SAWS. It’s been two years and I still really love it. And for some reason, they still really like me and keep asking me to come back,” he laughs.



“If I hadn’t found long-distance backpacking, and a love for being outside, I probably would have relapsed by this point.”

State University’s cafeteria where he met John Lane, a member of the university’s IT department. They quickly discovered a shared passion for hiking. “He took me under his wing. I’d been hiking the same 5-mile trail around the Buffalo Mountains every day after work and didn’t know there was much else around me,” Tyler recalls. “John gave me a list of local places to hike. He also gifted me some of his very expensive backpacking gear, which I’ve used for almost 4,000 miles.”

Tyler chronicled his hiking adventures on his Instagram account (@cave_depression) and caught the attention of Scotty Bowman, Tennessee Program Manager and Lead Trainer with Southern Appalachian Wilderness Stewards (SAWS). “He’d seen my attempted hike from Indian Grave Gap to Damascus in 13-degree weather, with snow up to my ankles,” Tyler laughs. “Scotty messaged me saying he knew that section of Trail and asked if I wanted a job.”

Tyler continues, “For many reasons I’m grateful Scotty took a chance on me. I didn’t have a squeaky clean background. While I was obsessed with hiking and already planning to hike the A.T., I didn’t even know anything, not even what Leave No Trace meant.”

Stewarding Before Thru-Hiking

After completing his first full season with SAWS, Tyler knew he was ready to tackle the whole Trail. In fact, just two days before starting his thru-hike, he’d been on the A.T. in Tennessee cross-cutting 400 trees damaged by Hurricane Helene. “SAWS taught me how to live outside — to be in the forest for four days at a time in the rain and the snow. It’s harder than thru-hiking,” he stresses.

For Tyler, being on trail supports his sobriety. “I’m good at trail work and hiking. I’m stubborn. I stick things out. I’ve learned patience and perseverance. When I’m on the Trail I know it’s never going to go fully my way, but I know I can always figure out a solution. Hiking makes me more comfortable in my sobriety,” he explains.

Being on the Trail also makes him more comfortable with his purpose. “It’s not all sunshine and rainbows how I got here,” he muses. “I’m an open book and I shared my story throughout my entire thru-hike. So many people are facing the darkness of severe alcohol and drug addiction. These trails helped me get sober. If I can help one person by keeping them open and maintained, it’s worth it for me. The Trail saved my life.” ☺