

She'll walk to fight world hunger

*By SEAN SMYTH
The Patriot Ledger*

SHARON - Erica Zelfand hopes to raise money for the fight against hunger while hiking the 2,174-mile Appalachian Trail.

But for Zelfand, a 20-year-old Sharon native attending McGill University in Montreal, the six-month trek from northern Georgia to Maine is as much about changing minds as it is about collecting donations.

“If you are from North America you have to be two things: grateful and willing to take on responsibility. There's a responsibility, being born into comfort, to look out for others," she said.

Zelfand's hike, scheduled to begin on March 1, will benefit Action Against Hunger, an agency that provides emergency and longer-term food aid to impoverished countries so they can become self-sufficient nutritionally.

She is collecting donations through her web site, www.hikeagainsthunger.com, which links to the Action Against Hunger site. Zelfand's site will include a journal, which she plans to update whenever she hikes into a town that has a library.

Although she wants people to give money, she also wants them to pay attention to the issue of worldwide hunger.

“Awareness is the first step," she said. “If every single person who heard of my hike had a sense of awareness about it ... it would be a step in the right direction, which would be more than if I didn't do the hike at all. I would be happy with that."

She leaves Saturday for Boulder, Colo., where she will train for several weeks before beginning the hike.

An occasional hiker who has done weeklong backpacking trips but nothing of this magnitude, Zelfand got the idea for the hike this past fall while working as a student leader at a McGill orientation session.

One of the workshops conducted by the Social Justice Committee of Montreal touched on hunger-related statistics that caused everyone in the room to take notice, Zelfand said.

She said she was also touched by what she viewed as the simplicity of the problem.

“With hunger, you don't have to be a genius to solve the problem," Zelfand said. “There's enough food around. It seems too simple of a problem to be a problem. ... Food does grow on trees."

Once she saw the problem and recalled one of her longtime goals, to hike the trail in its entirety, she knew she could do some good.

“The idea for a fund-raiser validated the idea for hiking the trail,” Zelfand said. “It became a plan, not an idea.”

So she is taking this semester off from school. Her boyfriend, Timothy Crespi, will join her on the hike.

Friends will occasionally visit and hike with Zelfand and Crespi for a couple of days or a week at a time. People who have heard about their trip have offered encouragement.

“They've been enthusiastic about meeting us,” she said.

She chose to work with Action Against Hunger because it spends 90 percent of donated money on relief efforts.

“You know exactly where the money is going,” she said.

Zelfand will not say how much money she has raised or even set a goal. Donors will have their names inscribed on one of the 108 beads of a Buddhist Mala necklace she will wear throughout her hike.

The beads, and the cause, will provide motivation for Zelfand, who is fighting long odds on her journey. More than 80 percent of those who start hiking the trail fail to complete it, she said.

But she's confident she will finish. In fact, she's looking forward to the challenge.

“The closer to the trip I get, I remember: ‘This is going to be fun. It's going to rock,’” she said.

How you can help

—Those interested in sponsoring Erica Zelfand can visit www.hikeagainsthunger.com or E-mail hikeagainsthunger@bust.com.

For information on Action Against Hunger, visit www.actionagainsthunger.org.

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