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## One peak at a time: Burlington woman more determined to hike following dog attack

By Sally Pollak  
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On New Year's Day, 2006, Kerry Shea drove from her home in Burlington's South End to the Adirondacks.

She decided to start the new year with a hike in the high peaks across the lake. That day, she climbed three peaks, a 14-hour hike, with bushwhacking through the snow. The mountains she hiked up are among the 46 in the Adirondacks whose summits are 4,000 feet or higher.

Shea, 46, an English professor at St. Michael's College, had no big plans beyond her hike that day. She just felt like walking in New York, seeing new summits. She was in the habit of hiking up Camels Hump every Tuesday morning before breakfast. This would be a change.

"I was branching out," Shea said. "I hadn't thought about doing more. I was going to try one hike and see if I liked it."

Except for certain days during her Long Trail hike in the summer of 1996, the 14-hour trip was her longest hike. It was exhilarating, she said. Shea thought she'd do more winter hiking across the lake.

The next morning, Shea was putting out her recycling, walking down her icy driveway to the curb, carrying from her car to the bin an iced-tea bottle. She saw two dogs, a pair of boxers, across the street. She thought little of it.

Then the dogs crossed the street, and came toward her down the driveway.

"Go home," Shea told the dogs.

They advanced, trotting, insistent. Then they attacked.

One dog bit her ankle; the other jumped on her chest. Shea was on the ground, defenseless, shielding her face and hands with her left arm. One of the dogs bit into her left arm — the one that was protecting her face — gnashed and chewed on it, moving its jaw up and down, up and down, her arm.

The other dog dug into her right leg, biting off her jeans from the knee down, ultimately inflicting eight bites in the flesh below her knee, including three big ones near her knee. "I was kicking it in the face," she said. "It just wouldn't stop. It was terrifying."

Shea was screaming for help, cries that were eventually answered by a jogger on a nearby street, and neighbors who began coming out of their homes. "I don't know what to say about my neighbors," Shea said. "They risked their own safety to help me. These dogs were in a frenzy."

The boxers stopped biting Shea when a dog who lives across the street started barking, diverting their attention. They dogs left Shea and started biting Maddie, the St. Bernard. Neighbors hit the boxers with their coats in an effort to stop the attacks.

They were able to corral them until their owner appeared, said Chip Mason, a lawyer who lives next door to

Shea. The dogs eventually were put in their owner's car, where they were lunging for the windows in a fury, Mason said.

Shea was taken by ambulance to the hospital, where she spent most of the day at the emergency room. Her leg bites were stitched; a hand wound was treated, which required removing her thumbnail; the puncture wounds on her arm were cleaned. Shea was started on a long course of antibiotics.

Dog bites of this severity, requiring medical attention, are infrequent in Burlington, said Deputy Police Chief Mike Schirling. He estimated there are fewer than six a year. One of the dogs was put down; the other was determined to be "docile" by the city's animal control officer, Jodi Harvey.

"It's about eight feet from Kerry's car to the curb," Mason said. "Your life can change in the blink of an eye."

### **More hiking**

If Shea's life changed that day, she became determined that the dog bites would not interfere with her hiking and other outdoor recreation. She is also an avid and skilled kayaker.

She started to hike again about a month after the accident, on Jan. 30. "I really focused on willing myself to be better," Shea said, "and hiking was the way."

She still had holes in her legs; her calf was swollen from a baseball-sized hematoma. She could barely put on her gaiters. "My whole focus was, 'I'm gonna hike,'" she said. "'I'm gonna hike.'"

It was important for healing, she thought, to start hiking again. So she set off for Seymour, a 16-mile hike. On the walk, she bled through her ace bandage, her gaiters and her pants. Blood seeped into her boots. The next week, she did Allen, another summit higher than 4,000 feet.

"I was doing these hikes, and I was pretty aware of how hard it was and how my leg felt," Shea said.

Despite the ache, she kept hiking; the walking made her feel alive. That winter, she climbed 10 peaks of the mountains in the 46-er club, a group of mountains bound by their height — and by a goal among certain hikers of ascending all of them. But Shea didn't set that goal for herself.

"It seemed so remote," she said. "Such a large number of mountains."

Hiking heightened the "euphoria" she experienced of being alive — a euphoria that Shea said was palpable in the weeks after the dog attack.

She would suffer a setback in July, about six months after the dogs bit her. Shea said she started to experience the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, with nightmares and flashbacks. "I could see the dogs again," she said. "Coming at me. And the attack."

Shea decided there was one way to try to conquer the PTSD: hiking.

"So I started going up into the mountains, relentlessly," she said. From the third week in July until classes started in late August, Shea climbed 27 peaks. She realized as she walked: This is making me feel a whole lot better. I'm going to finish.

"Physically, I got stronger and stronger as I did more hiking," she said. "I felt less and less vulnerable. I also felt a real surge: I can still do this. There's such joy in that."

By mid-September, Shea had summited all the 4,000-plus foot peaks in the 46-er group.

She completed the 46ers on Sept. 12, on Saddleback. About half a mile from the summit, at a split in the trail, a loose dog came running toward Shea, barking. She froze, and clung to the backpack of her hiking companion. She started to hyperventilate. "I completely lost it," Shea said.

Her friend called to the dog's owners, and asked that the animal be leashed. Shea, trying to hold back tears,

walked to the mountain top.

### Winter 46ers

The 46-er club Web site ([www.adk46r.org](http://www.adk46r.org)) lists 5,964 hikers, through the end of 2006, who have hiked to the top of the Adirondack peaks that are 4,000 feet or higher. These are hikers who have walked up in the spring, summer or fall. Shea is No. 5,909.

Far fewer hikers have attempted — or achieved — this mark in the winter, from the winter solstice to the spring equinox. That number, through Oct. 8, 2006, is 348, according to the organization. An online forum, [www.adkhighpeaks.com](http://www.adkhighpeaks.com), identifies a number of hikers who achieved the goal in the winter of 2007. Shea is on that list, No. 360 of the 365 hikers recognized as members of the winter 46-er club.

Building on the high peaks she climbed last year, Shea set out this winter with renewed purpose. She found that hiking was the only time her leg didn't hurt; she would take on seven, eight or nine peaks a week — planning her hikes around her teaching schedule.

This meant leaving her Scarff Avenue home at 3:30 or 4 in the morning, eating a peanut butter sandwich in the car, beginning her hikes in the dark, walking into the sunrise. She would leave the woods after sunrise, her way lighted by a headlamp.

"There are very few things I have ever done that felt as good as some of the hikes in the Adirondacks," she said.

She finished again on Saddleback, March 4. It was snowing lightly all day; there was no wind. Shea hiked alone.

When she got home, there was a message on her answering machine from her 22-year-old son, Alexey.

"Congratulations," he said. "I hope you're really happy."

Shea has the outline of bite marks on her leg, including one about the size of a baseball. Her leg aches when she's sitting — but it never hurts when she hikes.

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