



FAISR'S UNIVERSAL EXPEDITION

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RECENTLY, FRIENDS OF ACCESS ISRAEL (FAISR) LAUNCHED ITS FIRST UNIVERSAL EXPEDITION IN NEW YORK. FAISR, A NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION THAT WORKS TO IMPROVE UNIVERSAL ACCESSIBILITY FOR ALL INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES, PARTNERED WITH PARATREK AND ACCESS ISRAEL FOR A TWO-WEEK TREK THAT INCLUDED ROCKEFELLER STATE PARK, BEAR MOUNTAIN, AND CENTRAL PARK.

In total, over 56 miles of hiking were covered by teams of people with and without disabilities. All who participated arrived as individuals and left as part of a united family. They grew close by working together during a total of 12 hikes, using communication, conversation, and a sense of togetherness. Through the collaborative efforts of Executive Director of FAISR Jamie Lassner and Omer Zur, founder and creator of Paratrek, the impossible for many was made possible for all.

Zur and two members of his team traveled from Israel, and for the first time in the United States debuted the 5.0 edition of the Paratrek trekker, which has covered grounds as low as the Dead Sea and as high as Kilimanjaro (a FAISR trip that took place in early in 2019). An all-terrain wheelchair, referred to as a trekker, allows people with disabilities to hike in non-accessible terrain or routes through the manual operation of the rider and hikers.

Throughout the first week, hikers were taken out of their comfort zones physically and emotionally as they completed morning and afternoon treks. Each day a new group was

able to experience the expedition regardless of their ability, race, religion, or age. On the third day of hiking, Fred Mahhs Jr, the founder and CEO of Mahhs Travels, who was paralyzed from the chest down in a diving accident, joined the expedition to go through rugged terrain. He stated it gave him the “feeling of freedom.” For several decades, he has been an internationally renowned disability advocate and went on to say, “the opportunity to be with friends and hike on trails and experience new things together was liberating and exciting!” The trekker united the entire team who were admiring the surrounding beauty of the outdoors. Through the teamwork all participants were able to navigate obstacles along the hike.

Chapel Haven Schleifer Center, a residential community and special education school for adults, joined FAISR and their partnering teams for three days of hiking and new experiences during the second week—many had never hiked before. The state of the art facility and award winning staff, work on the specific needs of each adult and create individualized goals and programs with them. Working



together, over 60 residents, their staff, and the FAISR, Paratrek, and Access Israel team hiked through a variety of trails in Rockefeller State Park with one being a most memorable traverse to the highest point with magnificent views, Eagle Point.

Relationships flourished through the hiking and sharing that took place during trek #1 of the Universal Expedition. Strong connections, lifelong friendships, and influential changes were created. Next stop The Israel National Trail. □

Taylor Callahan and Alexandra Nava-Baltimore are FAISR Ambassadors and are each completing multiple degrees in college.