



Quadriplegic rocks the GAP trail with plans to cross the U.S.

'Why can't we do the rail trails? You are not going to get off so easily just because you're paralyzed.'

By Mary Ann Thomas
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Todd Gladfelter shifted gears with his left hand on his modified recumbent e-trike riding to Point State Park via the [Three Rivers Heritage/Great Allegheny Passage trail](#) this spring.

Throwing down 30 miles is a good day for Gladfelter, a quadriplegic who has feeling in only 20% of his body below the neck. The controls to operate his modified bike are located on the left side of the trike, as his left hand works fairly well.

good riders

The Pittsburgh stop was part of a 435-mile trip from Washington D.C. to Pittsburgh and Ohio via the C&O, Great Allegheny Passage, Montour Trail, Panhandle Trail and a section of the Great American Rail-Trail.

After starting in early spring, they completed their first 435 miles in late May, which is the first leg of an estimated 1,800-mile trip along rail trails to Washington state. They plan to complete their journey in 2026.

Gladfelter, 63, of New Ringgold, Schuylkill County, and his wife of 42 years, Cindy Ross, mounted the 2-year trail odyssey to show the public it is possible for many disabled and older people to travel great distances safely, free of the dangers of public roads.

"Being out on the road is not safe for many people," said Gladfelter. Ross quickly added, "It is not safe for anybody."

While Gladfelter said biking is not as much fun as before he was disabled, it's still pretty great.

"When I'm riding my bike, I'm more relaxed than when I'm walking and have to always look down.

"On the bike, I have a greater sense of freedom. I feel like I am almost normal," he said.

Adaptive cycling for the disabled, who face substantial barriers, boosts physical and mental health with many benefits such as cardiovascular fitness and muscle strength, according to a host of [studies](#).

The couple can't just bring their gear, camp and jump on their bikes or strap on their hiking boots and just go. They need a base camp to satisfy daily physical needs and chores.

It's all about motivation, preparation and lots of support from friends and strangers. And tuning into weather forecasts.

To be comfortable, Gladfelter cannot sleep in a tent or a trailer bed. Because he cannot regulate his body temperature, the couple watches the weather carefully.

They will not ride in the heat of the summer. Ross plans to grow her organic garden while Gladfelter will continue creating chainsaw [woodcarvings](#) using one hand.

They admit it is not easy, but certainly better than not doing it.

The cross-country rail trail trip is just another hurdle for a series of new limitations for this uber outdoorsman.

Gladfelter broke three vertebrae in his neck after slipping off a shed on Black Friday in 2021. The fall left him paralyzed on his right side with only partial movement on the left.

If Gladfelter hadn't rehabbed aggressively and didn't keep up his outdoor activities, his wife concluded: "He'd be in a nursing home doing puzzles."

First, doctors told Gladfelter he would never walk again. After intense rehab — more rehab than prescribed — he can walk.

Since Gladfelter was injured, Ross has been a nurturing caregiver and wanted to jumpstart his outdoor activities.

"I said to Todd, 'Why can't we do the rail trails? You are not going to get off so easily just because you're paralyzed.'"

Gladfelter hopes that riding and pushing his limits will increase his quality of life in the future. "I'm interested to see how this riding increases muscle. It could do something amazing to my abilities, I don't know. The doctors don't know.

"We do everything else before the doctors and therapists tell us we should do it and it ends up being positive."

If there's one constant in the couple's life, it has been the ability to travel great distances on foot or by bike — oftentimes with their two children in tow.

Ross, a travel, nature and cycling writer, has promoted the therapeutic benefits of nature for years.

A prolific author whose works include the 2021 ["Walking Towards Peace: Veterans Healing on American Trails,"](#) she established the nonprofit, [River House PA](#), 13 years ago to take veterans into nature.

"I knew my whole life what a wonderful thing being in nature can do for your own mental health and raising your children," she said.

Ross and her husband took their kids on long-distance trails and European trips, visiting 35 countries since they were toddlers, she said.

Through years of adventure travel, the couple notched the triple crown of hiking — conquering the Pacific Crest, Appalachian and Continental Divide trails.

More recently, they have set their sights on the burgeoning numbers of rail trails.

A network of old rail lines converted into recreational trails now tally almost 26,000 miles in the United States, according to the [Rails to Trails Conservancy](#).

The longest rail trail completed by the couple this spring was the [Great Allegheny Passage](#), on which they traversed 150 miles from Cumberland, Md., to Pittsburgh.

"The GAP trail is one of the best in the country and that's a big deal," Gladfelter said.

Ross noted that people she spoke to on the trail were traveling long distances. "It was amazing. We saw hundreds of people."

To learn more about the couple's adventures, read Ross' travel blog, [Road to Recovery at cindyrosstraveler.com](#).

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