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## Adventure Of A Lifetime

Recent College Grad Hitchhikes Across The United States

Shelby Mertens / DN-R 7 hrs ago



Andrew Bollinger, a recent graduate of Bridgewater College, embarked on a 27-day hitchhiking trip

On May 19, Andrew Bollinger, 22, stood near Exit 243 of Interstate 81 in Harrisonburg, carrying a 45-pound backpack filled with camping supplies, and his thumb stuck out.

After graduating from Bridgewater College in the spring, Bollinger decided to embark on a 27-day hitchhiking trip around the country by himself. Bollinger estimates he traveled close to 4,000 miles. Starting in Harrisonburg, Bollinger went as far north as Pennsylvania, as far west as St. Louis, down south to Florida and back home to Virginia.

### Living Off The Kindness Of Others

He stayed with friends in different cities and even strangers. Bollinger was picked up by people from all walks of life, including two ex-convicts, a Navajo Indian and a 70-year-old woman.

"I mapped out my route using friends and family around the country as stopping points at the end of each day," he said. "I didn't always get to where I was trying to go, and not everyone was family or friends either."

Bollinger, the son of a preacher, stood for two hours waiting for someone to pick him up and drive him to his first stop in Northern Virginia. As he waited, he had no idea what would lie ahead of him.

"It's just kind of been my dream to travel the country in some sort of fashion," Bollinger said. "I've considered biking across the country or hiking the whole Appalachian Trail, but I settled on hitchhiking because you get to know people so well because you're stuck in a car with them for so many hours."

Bollinger blogged his adventure on AndrewsTrip.com to write about the people he met. The blog also served as a way of communication for his family and friends.

Bollinger said he didn't pay a dime during his month on the road, living off the kindness of others who provided him with meals.

“Even strangers will provide you food,” he said. “This guy just reached in the back of his car and handed me like twenty Slim Jims.”

### All Walks Of Life

After leaving his friends in Northern Virginia, Bollinger’s second stop was Prince Frederick, Md. Bollinger eventually made his way through northern Maryland to central Pennsylvania where he stayed with college friends as well as Camp Blue Diamond, a Church of the Brethren camp.

However, Bollinger’s plans changed when a random couple picked him up in the middle of Pennsylvania. The strangers were supposed to drop Bollinger off at the next exit, but ended up inviting him to their home.

The woman, Bollinger found out, served time in prison for driving under the influence of drugs, and the man also had drug charges and was in prison for robbing a bank. Bollinger stayed with the couple for the night and said they gave him clothes and stocked him up with food. Although he may have been frightened at first, Bollinger said he became friends with the pair.

“They were very courteous — the nicest people I’ve met,” Bollinger said.

From Pennsylvania, Bollinger hitchhiked to Columbus, Ohio, to stay with his uncle. His next stop was to the outskirts of St. Louis. Originally planned to turn south to New Orleans, Bollinger’s plans were derailed once again. Instead of seeing “The Big Easy,” Bollinger decided to travel all the way down to Florida when he was picked up by a Navajo Indian named Marshall who was headed for Atlanta. Bollinger’s new plan was to surprise his grandparents in Sebring, Fla.

### New Perspectives

Bollinger, a philosophy and religion major in college, found himself in very deep and personal conversations with the people who picked him up. Bollinger said strangers would open up to him.

"I would be in the car with these people and we'd just start talking about everything," he said. "People really open up to you, for whatever reason, to a stranger in the car. I heard some really personal stories, anything from childhood trauma-type stuff ... people talk about job troubles [and] the most popular things that come up in conversation are religion and politics. It would come up almost every time."

Bollinger enjoyed hearing different perspectives. One he particularly found interesting was Marshall, the Navajo Indian. The deafening silence was awkward at first, Bollinger said, until the man finally starting to speak to him. He discovered that the man was traveling from his home in Phoenix to Atlanta for work.

"He talked to me about what I was seeking in life," Bollinger said. "He said you always go back to your ancestors. If you go back far enough, you'll see what you're looking for. That was a big thing for him, ancestry, and where your roots are. He also talked about nature and pollution."

The two switched turns driving and occasionally Marshall would stop along the road and say blessings and prayers over the trees. Bollinger said he once drew out a bag of unknown substance and sprinkled it over the river as a blessing. Earlier in his trip, Bollinger also learned about Hinduism from two Nepali men on their way to Washington, D.C.

Once Marshall dropped him off in Atlanta, Bollinger then hitchhiked his way to Tampa, Fla. From there, he reached his grandparents home in Sebring. After visiting with his grandparents for a few days, Bollinger set off for the journey back home. He used the network at CouchSurfing.com to stay at a home in South Carolina, which he said ended up being a mansion. Next, he hitchhiked to Durham, N.C., to stay with friends. He finally made it to Virginia Beach, where his plans changed a third time. Bollinger made his way west and ended up hiking a section of the Appalachian Trail.

By that time, on June 24, Bollinger was exhausted and ready to return home.

"The last day was the worst, my mother ended up picking me up and driving me home a hundred miles," he said. "It was getting dark and I was just done. There was no where to camp, I was out of food, I was sick."

He embraced his parents tearfully, realizing just how much he missed them during those 27 days.

### Family Not Shocked

Bollinger's father, Glenn, pastor of Beaver Creek Church of the Brethren in Bridgewater, said he was not shocked at all by his son's post-graduation plans.

"It didn't surprise me," Glenn Bollinger said. "He's always wanted to do some type of adventure so this really didn't shock me ... It was almost a sense of relief. A year ago he talked about going to New Zealand to go hiking."

The family maintained contact with Bollinger through texting on his new smartphone and his blog posts. His father said he was able to communicate directly with Bollinger every three or four days.

Although he was worried as any parent would, Glenn Bollinger was confident his son would be safe.

"A part of being a parent is be willing to let them strike out on their own and to make decisions for themselves," he said. "I felt that he has a good head on his shoulders, and he would be careful not to put himself too much into harm's way."

Overall Glenn Bollinger thought it was a good experience for his son.

"In life, you don't necessarily know what's going to happen day to day, and you need to be able to make good decisions in the moment," his father said. "He had to change his mind about where he was going to stay or how far he was going to go ... [and] I think one of the neat things out this he met people of all walks of life."

Would He Do It Again?

Since his hitchhiking trip ended, Bollinger has already traveled to Puerto Rico to chaperone a youth mission trip at his church. Next, Bollinger is planning to join the Brethren Volunteer Service, where he may be sent anywhere in the world, possibly as far as Japan.

But Bollinger didn't rule out the possibility of hitchhiking again.

"I certainly would never take it back, because it was a fantastic experience. I wouldn't be afraid to. One thing that I did find out was that it does take a lot of energy," he said.

Bollinger's interest in people and their stories may draw him back.

"People out there are nicer than you think. There's so many amazing people out there," Bollinger said. "Everyone has a story."

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