

Hello, my name is Chase Vaillancourt and I am a senior at Virginia Tech studying Clinical Neuroscience. If you remember me from last year, I was one of the good-looking chaps who won the photo contest; however, much has changed since then. For instance, I have finally settled on a career path: enlisting in the United States Air Force. Many people question why I went to college if I am “not going to use my degree” in the military, but I believe being a student helped me mature and learn valuable life lessons that enlisting directly after high school would not have taught me. Moving on, another notable part of me that has changed since last year is my eyes, both figuratively and literally.

In October of last year, I received PRK eye surgery to correct my terrible vision. The operation went as smoothly as possible and I now have perfect eyesight. While this procedure altered my literal eyes by scraping corneal tissue and reshaping lenses, my personal views were also changed by the places I went to and the trips I went on. I added fresh skills like ice climbing to my already long list of hobbies that includes rock climbing, surfing, backpacking, playing guitar, and playing rugby. I got to stand on top of Mount Washington, a mountain notorious for its unpredictable and dangerous climate, in the middle of winter with my closest friends. Overcoming my fear of roller coasters, I saw what Busch Gardens looks like from the top of their tallest joy ride. I attended weddings and funerals, birthday parties and baby showers, graduations and retirements. All of these experiences changed me for the better and taught me something worthwhile. Whenever I travel it reminds me of my favorite quote by Terry Pratchett: “Why do [we] go away? So that [we] can come back. So that [we] can see the place [we] came from with new eyes and extra colors. And the people there see [us] differently, too. Coming back to where [we] started is not the same as never leaving.”

Lastly, thanks to the ever advancing technology in our phones, I always had a camera on me throughout life’s events. Although the camera in my phone is not the best, I still enjoy looking at the photos of the past and remembering the details that a photo cannot share. When looking back on those memories, I cannot help but to also think forward to the future. My goals for the future are simple. I plan to enlist in the Air Force, to help others, and to never stop exploring – especially with friends.

Just Another Day

Before leaving our cheap motel, we triple checked each of our packs for the supplies necessary to make a summit bid on Mount Washington, a mountain notorious for its unpredictable and extremely dangerous weather, especially during winter. I quickly reminded everyone to remember to pack a light heart, because today was shaping up to be serious. My five closest friends and I planned this trip out meticulously with every crucial detail written down in each of our pocket notebooks: which trail to take, where to rest for lunch, when to put on our snow goggles, and so on. We stuffed all of our mountaineering gear into the two cars that were pathetically unprepared for the frozen roads ahead. After we crammed ourselves into the dense vehicles and began making our journey to the trailhead, I had to pinch myself. What we were about to try would seem completely ludicrous to some people, so I had to remind myself that today, like every other, was just another day in our lives.

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The ice crunched under our crampons as we made our way over the white ridgeline of the mountain. As soon as we were over the crest, the harsh winds were whipping and biting any exposed part of our bodies. We paused for a much needed snack and water break. Behind a large group of boulders, where the wind could not steal our warmth, I recall noticing how gorgeous the day truly was. I noticed the blissful clouds billowing over the icy rocks. I noticed my friends laughing and taunting each other playfully. Most importantly, I noticed how happy I was in that moment.

I remember thinking about the fact that we were miles away from any busy city. Besides the observatory at the peak and our phones for emergencies, we had no connection to the modern world and were finally able to notice the grandeur of our environment without being shackled to technology. Nowadays, it seems trivial to go outside and view nature when a person can essentially accomplish the same thing from the comfort of his or her own couch; however, seeing the world from a lit up rectangle does not do it justice.

I snapped out of this daydream when I saw everyone had finished chewing their smooshed granola bars and started to move on. We continued up the steep north face until we reached the mythical top. Once at the summit, we relished the moment and snapped a couple of pictures for our mothers who we knew were frantically awaiting our phone calls so we could ensure our safety. We painstakingly finished the hike a couple of hours after the sun had set. After taking a moment to reflect on the epic trip we had just

shared, we immediately packed the cars to go back to the motel to celebrate. Most people would have probably purchased champagne and drank to their hearts' content, but we decided to celebrate in a way accustomed to us: cooking a massive amount of ramen in a microwave and falling into a deep slumber while watching an Indiana Jones marathon. Upon waking, we set out to explore the surrounding area in search of some frozen waterfalls to ice climb. Now, we had never used ice climbing tools before that day and most people would have called us lunatics for attempting to climb without an instructor or experience, but I just had to remind myself that today, like any other, was just another day in our lives.



**Us on the summit of Mt. Washington- 31 Dec. 2018.*