

## A DAY ON THE RIVER

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By *Lindsay Key*

A thick morning haze was lifting as a green sport-utility vehicle charged westward through the mountains in Giles County. Inside, the fruity scent of sunscreen penetrated the deep smell of river grit caked in the window cracks and floorboard.

Miriam Harshberger, 7, and her 9-year-old brother, Brendan, gazed sleepily out the back window beneath floppy fishermen's hats. They're still on L.A. time, remarked their grandmother, Kathleen Harshberger of Radford, a petite, blond woman with rosy cheeks and a soothing, lilting voice. Kate Harshberger, the children's aunt, sat a row ahead of her mother. Dick Harshberger, their grandfather and a Radford councilman, rode in front with rafting guide Shawn Hash.

The children were visiting their grandparents for 10 days. Their time in Virginia would also include a weekend trip to Jamestown. But on Aug. 8, they were setting out to experience the New River for the second time in their short lives.

Miriam remembers the first rafting trip she took with her grandparents, when she was just 5.

The part Miriam said she remembers most is Hash -- the lithe, wide-eyed river guide who owns **Tangent Outfitters**. The 39-year-old could be a child's adventure hero, with his polarized sunglasses, explosive energy and relentless enthusiasm for discovery.

"This is like Lewis and Clark. We're going into the wild, checkin' it out," Hash told the children as he backed the SUV and the raft trailer hitched to it into the boat launch in Glen Lyn. During the six-mile trip to the West Virginia line, the children would have the opportunity to plunge into the New River, into its gushing adventure and deep, slow-moving mystery.

For Shawn Hash, the best thing about being a river guide is "the relationship you have with your client and the crazy knowledge you gain from hanging out with people."

He's met some very interesting people through his job, including Gov. Tim Kaine, National Public Radio's Noah Adams and Matt LeBlanc, an actor known for his role in the syndicated TV show "Friends."

Hash grew up in Dublin and earned a geography degree from Virginia Tech in 1991. He has guided on the Virginia and West Virginia stretches of the New River. He also spent seven winters working as a backcountry ski guide in Colorado.

In 1992, Hash and his brother, Tyrell, opened **Tangent Outfitters**. Fifteen years later, the company has added kayaking and rafting to its services -- not to mention a fully stocked outdoor store and cafe in Pembroke. But for Hash, growth isn't beneficial unless it's smart and preserves the Mayberry feeling that makes a small town special.

"I'm not about the whole area getting developed up," he said. "I'm not about the 100-canoe model. We even cringe when we put six or eight canoes on at once."

Hash pushed the raft off the bank into the river, jumping in the back to grab the oars. Brendan, seated with his grandmother and sister at the front of the boat, leaned over the side to peer in the river.

"Look at the fish!" he exclaimed, pointing his tiny finger at the small creatures lapping at the side of the boat.

It was just a prelude to the abundant wildlife the family would see.

"OK, who's going to help me paddle?" Hash asked, passing paddles to the front.

The family approached Johnson Falls, the first set of Class II rapids on their 7-mile stretch.

The rapids are named after the Johnson property located on the bank, Hash said, adding that most of the river's rapids are named after the farming families of Giles County.

Hash declared Miriam the rock navigator for the run. Perched at the front of the boat, she looked like a tiny pixie with tangled blond hair.

"There's a rock!" she cried, as the current picked up speed.

"Thank you, Miriam," Hash said, swerving to avoid it. "Alright, here's where it's gonna get tight and technical."

"We're ready!" shouted Kathleen Harshberger. She and the children raised their hands in the air as they bounced over the rapids.

"Woooo! Woooo!" Hash yelled.

Hash almost died in 1999. He and his wife, Molly, were in Crested Butte, Colo. She was snowboarding and he was skiing, something Hash jokingly calls a "mixed marriage."

Hash made a wrong turn in a rural backcountry skiing area that put him in the path of an avalanche. It was the type of snow slide that he was later told had a 10 percent survival rate, he said. As snow nearly smothered him, he had to claw for a breath of icy air. A rescue crew pulled him out.

He's also made it out of Class VI rapids in North Carolina's Green Gorge and 30- to 40-foot drops on Little Stony Creek in Giles County. But these days, with two young children at home, he is satisfied with Southwest Virginia's section of the New River. The Class I, II, III and IV rapids and prime fishing are a rush.

"Here I feel a lot more control," he said. "I don't feel like any part of what I do is dangerous. I had a buddy in West Virginia, one of the best guides, have someone perish on his boat. As I get older, I understand the severity of that. Here, the worst thing that's going to happen is they're not going to catch a fish."

After the rapids, the Harshbergers escaped from the 90-degree heat to the cool river.

They floated languidly in their life jackets.

"This feels wonderful," said Dick Harshberger.

Ducks skimmed through the water closest to the bank and Canada geese honked in flight.

Hash jumped into the water.

"A lot of people come with an objective -- to go fishing, to go canoeing. But the best part of a river is being in, on and around it, with no agenda," he mused from the water.

After a 15-minute swim, the rafters enjoyed a root beer. Blue damsel flies landed on their soda cans. Hash said the number of damsel flies indicates how healthy and active the river is.

"When the damsels are moving, everything's moving. It means we're gonna catch some fish," he said, though no one in the boat had a rod.

They paddled on to Shumate Falls, which Hash maneuvered down using a "boof" move,

a kayaking term that means using a rock for leverage or "kissing" it.

"Can we do that again?" Miriam asked, but she settled for going for another swim.

It wasn't long after everyone was back in the boat when Hash yelled, "Bald eagle, bald eagle!"

The family looked up to see the majestic bird with its pure white markings careen over the river and out of sight.

"Wow!" said Kathleen Harshberger.

"Thank you, Shawn," Kate Harshberger whispered.

"Don't thank me. Thank God for that. That is a blessing," Hash said.

At noon, the Harshbergers lunched on a small bank. Over sandwiches and chips, Hash and Dick Harshberger explained the value of hunting to Brendan. Brendan raised his eyebrows pensively as the men explained that without natural predators, and without humans hunting them, deer would die of starvation.

The family got back on the raft and the conversation switched to the need for more lodging near the river and then to books.

The conversation was about to shift again when Hash began yelling and pointing at another bald eagle, swooping across the river. Hash said his gut feeling was that it was the same one.

"You push birds down the river. They're out hunting and they try to get a little bit away from you," he said.

Miriam began counting on her fingers the animals she had seen -- bald eagles, red-tailed hawks, a great blue heron, Canada geese, ducks, deer, cows and fish.

Hash continued to marvel over the bald eagle sighting. Usually he's lucky to have two or three in a year, he said. He can't believe he's had two in one day.

When Hash is about to say something important, he holds his hand over his heart and begins the sentence with, "My heart is ... " He does this often when he is talking about preserving and protecting the New River.

Hash remembers when heavy rains a few Julys ago created gravel bars along the riverbed. He remembers when a new crayfish species from the Midwest was introduced to the river by bait fishermen. Every May, he feels a "funk" on the river when the fish are spawning. There's no good fishing during that time, when the fish have other things on their minds, he says.

"The river just does these changes," he explained. "It's like a friend you've had for 15 years. They change. She and I have had a relationship for 10 to 15 years, but she changes. You still fish her, but she changes."

The Harshbergers were near the end of their journey. It was about 2 p.m. when they first saw other people on the river -- two fishermen who had backed their truck down to the water. The roads for getting to these parts of the river are rough, Hash said. Some are accessible only by ATV.

The rafters caught their breath as the bald eagle appeared a third and final time. The brown and white beauty was downriver, flying low and skimming the water with its talons. Then it was gone.

Brendan and Miriam spotted a rope swing hanging from a tree on the left bank and asked Hash to guide them over. Climbing up the slippery mud slope, they found footing on the tree's roots. Their grandfather tossed them the rope from the raft; Hash backed the raft to the side to spot the children as they took turns casting out and plopping into the deep

water.

Next, the family floated along to the last rapids of the day. State Line Falls is named for its location on the Virginia/ West Virginia line.

Hash was a little worried about the low water, but successfully guided the family through a bubbling break in the rocks. They dropped down several feet and a wave washed over them. Miriam and Brendan squealed with excitement. Kathleen, Dick and Kate Harshberger laughed.

The family turned around to look back at the rocky rapids as their guide slowly pulled them away. They sniffled and adjusted lopsided hats. Farther down the river, on the bank, two Tangent employees waved, ready to pull in the raft.

Brendan was quiet for the last few moments. His feet dangled in the water, and he turned his freckled cheeks to the sun.

"See guys, can't you hear it?" he asked. Everyone on the boat was silent, straining their ears. The faint rush of wind and water suddenly seemed overwhelming.

Finally, someone asked "What is it?"

"Nothing," Brendan said with a smile. "You can hear nothing."

#### Tangent's history

1992: **Tangent Outfitters** opens by Shawn and Tyrell Hash with two canoes and four mountain bikes. Both continue to work outside jobs in sales.

1994: **Tangent Outfitters** works out a deal with Radford leaders to use Bisset Park. The Hashes keep their canoes, kayaks, mountain bikes and rafts in storage sheds. Tyrell Hash moves to Charlotte to pursue a sales job.

2001: Shawn Hash rents property in Pembroke to store his equipment.

2004: Hash buys property on U.S. 460, near the road leading to the Cascades, and builds the company's first permanent building, which would serve as a storage building, store and cafe.

2005: The store opens.

2007: Tangent boasts 22 part-time and full-time employees in the summer season and eight in the winter.