

# 500 days in the wild: Hiking the Trans Canada Trail

-by April MacDonald

When you meet someone remarkable, you are compelled to write about them.

When remarkable people meet the world, they begin a journey, and, in her case, make films.

Her name is Dianne Whelan and her life has been nothing short of incredible. A former journalist by trade, she now is an extreme filmmaker and adventurer. Whelan has travelled to some of the most remote places in Canada and the world.

She has been to Everest and filmed the acclaimed *40 Days at Base Camp*. She has been to the high Arctic with the Canadian military when they erected the Canadian flag, and she has lived on the ice with the Inuit of the Northern Arctic.

Her latest endeavour, however, has never been done before.

She is taking on the Trans Canada Trail, which is the longest trail in the world.

The Trans Canada Trail began as a concept in 1992, it has been expanded and developed every year since and will be officially opening in 2017.

There are nearly 24,000 kilometres on this trail, from the Atlantic to the Pacific to the Arctic oceans, linking 1000 Canadian communities.

She chose July 1<sup>st</sup>, Canada Day, to depart from mile zero in St. John's Newfoundland. What's more

is that she is not doing this in any mundane manner. She is biking, hiking and paddling the 24,000 km route across Canada.

"I intend to film an independent feature documentary and write a non-fiction book about the journey as I have done on my two previous films," says Whelan.

"My vision is to make a documentary that explores four themes: art, spirit, ecology, story. I perceive these four themes to be like the four quarters of a circle," explains Whelan.

"As I travel I will seek to juxtapose First Nation oral stories with European written ones. I have both European and First Nation blood in my DNA. I feel a sense of identification with both sides: the oppressed and the oppressors. The story of my journey, and the way the film is made, is about the fusion of these distinct ways of seeing the world," added Whelan.

Dianne Whelan has also just turned 50.

"I'm at the point in my life where I have the right cadence now. When you are taking on something like the Trans Canada Trail, you can't rush it, you must find a good pace that will sustain you," explained Whelan in an interview with *The Oran*.

*The Oran* caught up with Whelan when she was forced to stop in Guysborough County to replace the tube in her bike tire.

"I had six great days of riding before this," said



Dianne Whelan's portrait in Cape Breton by Rob Smith.

Whelan.

She said of all the challenges that she has taken on, this latest project to hike, paddle and cycle the Trans Canada Trail has been, "by far the most challenging physically."

Whelan has also refused to take part in any corporate sponsorship for her journey or for the film.

"This is coming from my heart, not my ego," said Whelan.

Whelan is a woman who is a passionate Canadian; she is also a storyteller who recognizes that we are living in an ever increasing private world when it comes to open space.

"We have this beautiful and fascinating Trail that is near complete," said Whelan.

Her favourite moments from her journey are embedded in the people and the beauty of the land.

"What I love about it is that we are all bonded by the love of this great land," said Whelan.

She said that the inclusiveness of the people she has met on her journey, especially here in Cape Breton, has been

remarkable.

At the end of August, Whelan exited the Port aux Basque ferry and began her trek in Nova Scotia.

"The Mi'kmaq of Membertou were so welcoming, they held a pipe ceremony and also gave me a beautiful handmade paddle for my journey, that was really something," told Whelan.

She said the only moment of fear on the journey this far was not from any wild animal.

"My only moment of fear was from Lady Bras D'or," laughed Whelan. "I was sucked out by high winds and into open water, that was scary," she added.

When asked her impression of the trails of Inverness County she said that, "there are no words to do justice for the magical realism of this place."

The outpouring of local support from business owners she said was also incredible.

Every time she was storm stayed, someone put her up and fed her.

When *The Oran* caught up with her she was on day 96 on the trail.

"I only count the days on the trail. I had gone from canoe to bike," said Whelan.

She has no real support team with her on her epic journey, but she does have some people who are helping her with her film making.

"You find a passion and if you're lucky you can make a living doing it," said Whelan.

"I just turned 50 and I want to remind the world that women are like wine; we get better with age," said Whelan.

She added that it was a tendency of women to set the bar low.

"Now, we are raising the bar to be mindful and present and to share the experiences we have had,"

and is something that the trail organizers here should be extremely proud of," explained Whelan.

"It is stunning, beautiful and amazing, with very cool towns filled with very cool people," said Whelan.

She said the kindness, generosity and warmth that was shown to her pulled strongly on her heart strings.

"You live in a completely unique place," added Whelan.

She plans to finish her journey when the Trans Canada Trail has its official grand opening in 2017 in Victoria, BC.

She wishes to help to inspire Nova Scotia to finish the Trail system and also to motivate others to



A selfie in front of the Stoupakis' in Inverness.

added Whelan.

She said that, years ago, when she was reflecting on her life she discovered that she had eight years of university education under her belt but didn't know how to grow a carrot.

She knew she had to make changes and nature was calling.

"You are sitting on the nicest piece of trail that I've seen so far. The care and love that has been put into this trail should be commended

volunteer to make sure that it happens.

"Nova Scotia is so beautiful and Inverness to the Causeway is, by far the most beautiful that I have seen yet," said Whelan.

"You build communities by building the trails that connect us," concluded Whelan.

Donate or follow Dianne Whelan on her journey by visiting [500daysinthewild.com](http://500daysinthewild.com), you can also check out her Facebook page.



Along the Celtic Shore Coastal Trail.

## Hawkins... From page 11

which was the worst job ever," said Hawkins.

"Eventually, I started to also work for Lavalife at night," added Hawkins.

She went on to say that the time she spent with the cleaning position was tough.

"I was always on bathroom duty," she said.

The experience that shook her and made her decide she needed a change was one day when she was cleaning a mansion.

"I remember looking

at pictures on a wall of a happy family. I remember looking at this happy family and hating them. And then I recognized a girl in one of the photos. I had gone to school with her," said Hawkins.

She said that it was at that moment when she fully realized the scope of her actions when she was a teenager and even in her 20s.

"I was not nice to people," said Hawkins.

She said when she

realized this it was like karma hitting her in the face.

"I realized I was paying for my past," added Hawkins.

She started looking for a better job, but because of her low income she had to choose who to feed in her family. She chose to feed her two kids and skipped most meals herself.

The road remained rocky and in 2010 the daughter that she had when she was a teenager, who

had moved out to live on her own, landed back at her door. She was pregnant and had no place to stay.

"She came to live with me and eventually I got sick and found out that I was also pregnant," said Hawkins.

"You just can't make this stuff up," said Hawkins to a stunned audience.

She continued to work and things were starting to get better, and then came another roadblock.

"I got fired for taking

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