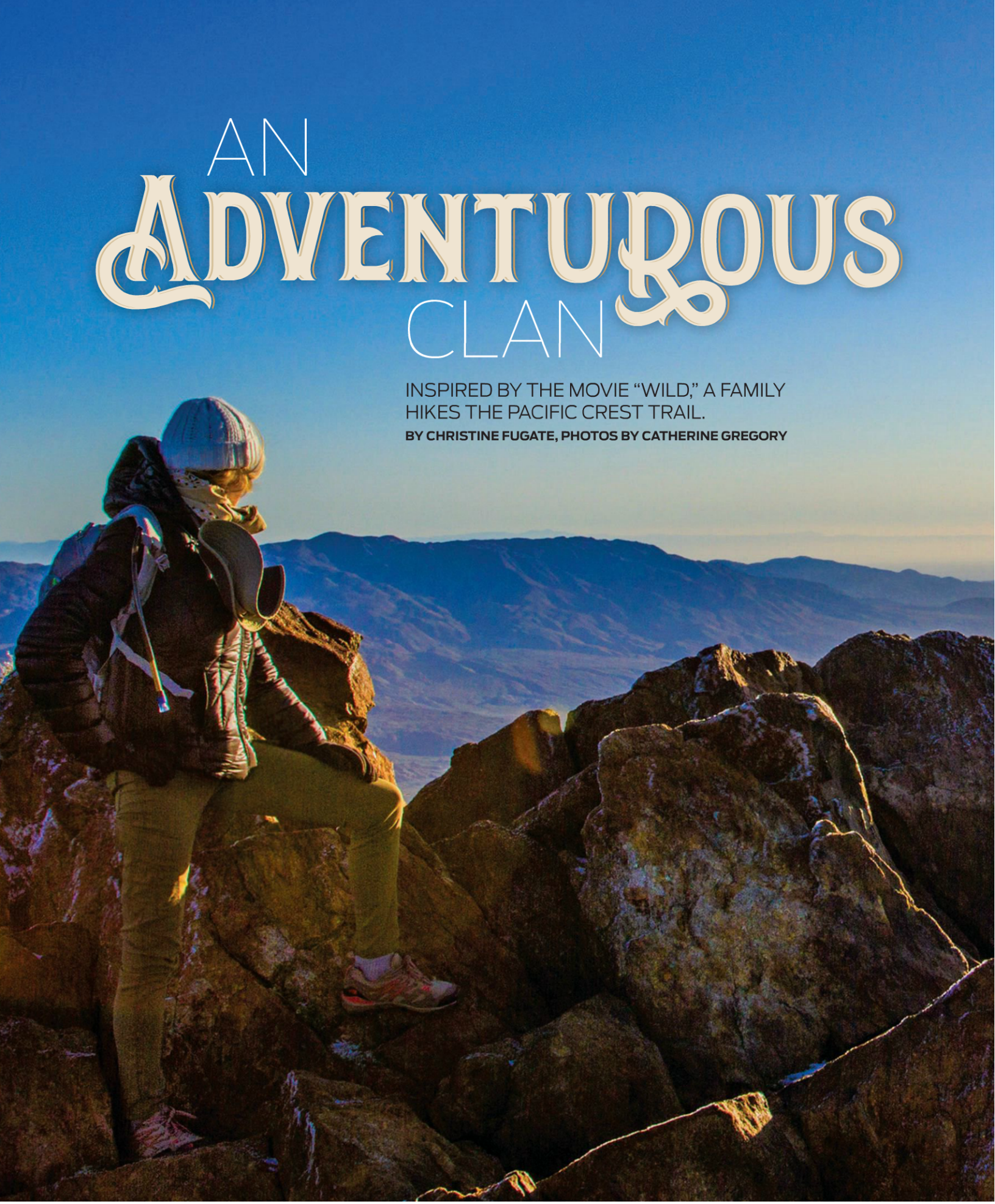
AN ADVENTUROUS CLAN

INSPIRED BY THE MOVIE "WILD," A FAMILY HIKES THE PACIFIC CREST TRAIL.

BY CHRISTINE FUGATE, PHOTOS BY CATHERINE GREGORY



After photographer Catherine Gregory saw the movie "Wild," based on Cheryl Strayed's book of the same name, hiking the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) intrigued her. Spanning 2,650 miles from Mexico to Canada, hikers cross through the Anza-Borrego desert, the glaciers of the Sierra Nevadas and volcanic peaks in the Cascade Range. Gregory, who lives in San Clemente, decided that when she turned 50, she would take her camera, a backpack and head out on this four month journey of physical challenge and self-discovery.

Catherine Gregory watching the sunrise from atop Granite Peak; ABOVE The crew at Foster Point

Unbeknownst to Gregory, her niece, Christine Machado, was also interested in hiking the trail and had started a family hiking group on Facebook. Machado had already recruited her mom, Gregory's sister Jill Burkhardt, to join her. When Gregory saw the post, she decided to join the duo. Since no one could take four months off from their various jobs, the women decided to become "PCT section hikers" and complete the trail with day hikes or overnighters. They agreed upon hiking the section together or separately, but each person had to complete every section.

THE PHOTOGRAPHER

Catherine Gregory had gotten into photography six years ago, while dating a surfer who wanted photos of himself at Riviera Beach. Always interested in photography, she bought a Canon 7D and taught herself how to shoot. Her photos began to run in Ghetto Juice, Surfing Magazine and Surfline.

Continuing to work her day job as a marketing director at a commercial lighting and electrical company, she continued to sharpen her photography skills. In 2015, she dated a ski patrol member at Big Bear and starting shooting inland. "I spent three days in the June Lake area, and went off on my own and shot all these beautiful mountain scenes." Gregory says. "After that, I was pretty much hooked on spending time in the mountains and shooting landscape."

Throughout their adventures, Gregory has taken her camera, capturing not only the beautiful vistas, but also the important milestones in their journey. "I don't know if I would ever get on trail without my camera," she says. "I want to document what we are doing in a beauti-

The Future Climbs

The women plan to complete section A by the end of 2016, traveling from Scissors Crossing to Warner Springs. The remaining two hikes involve spending the night on the trail. Machado is now planning Section B to take place in 2017.

The women can only hike during certain months when the desert is not too hot, and the mountains are not snowed over. "It takes approximately five months for thru-hikers to complete the entire trail between April and Early October," says Gregory. "I'm guessing it will be a year [for us] for each one of their months."

In regards to "Wild," the women have found Cheryl Strayed's story to be an accurate portrayal. "You have to pull yourself up by your boot straps," say Machado. "I think that is something that everyone encounters on the trail."

To follow their adventure, go to (thisgirlhikes.blogspot.com)

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Catherine Gregory enjoying a lunchtme view, Hiking the trail; Christine Machado at a trail marker

ful way." In addition to shooting the outdoors, she has grown closer with her family. Burkhardt is married to an officer in the Navy who traveled a lot. Gregory didn't get to spend much time with her niece while she was growing up. "I've gotten to know my niece and sister on a different level. Also, there's a level of trust," she says. "It's impossible to not bond out in that environment."

THE PLANNER

"In January 2016, I set a goal for myself to take a hike every month," Christine Machado says. "I had been kicking around the idea of the Pacific Crest Trail for a couple years. I decided to stop thinking about it and just get out and do it," she says. She and her husband began with the Eagle Rock section, but the hike ended up being much longer than they anticipated. "I felt small and at the mercy of the elements," she says. "But, seeing the PCT Blazes along the trail made me alive with a sense of adventure." Machado works as a manager on duty for the clothing store The Loft. Only able to hike on the weekend, she started a Facebook group to find day hikers. Before she knew it, she had a group of fellow hikers—her mom and aunt.

In the group, Machado plans the section and elevation. "I have always had an affinity for numbers and maps," she says. "I like to know the elevation and how much we are moving." She took Section A of the PCT and broke it down into eight hikes. On the third hike, they did their first point-to-point hike from Desert View Picnic Area to Garnet Peak. They took two cars, dropping one car at the end point and driving back to the trailhead together. "The views of this section were epic, which I found absolutely exhilarating," says Machado. "I really enjoyed looking out over the desert and into the expanse of the mountains to the north."

In addition to planning, she has been making short videos of the hikes and posting them on her blog, This Girl Hikes. She hopes to inspire people, who might be intimidated, to get out on the trail. "In the media, there is an idea of what an 'outdoorsman' looks like," Machado says, "And for someone that doesn't fit that model, there is us, showing that it can still be done."

The experience has also strengthened her relationship with her mother and aunt. "Now it's closer, like a friendship," she says. "I was always close with my parents, but to be out there leading has changed the dynamic. I'm demonstrating that I am an adult with my parents."

Frosty views from the trail

THE NURTURER

When Jill Burkhardt's daughter, Christine Machado, asked her mom to join her on hikes, she says her response was: "I'm not in the best of shape." And Machado said, "Mom, it's just walking." But the hiking plan wasn't just "walking" for Machado; she was serious about getting into shape and completing the Pacific Crest Trail. Burkhardt wanted to spend time with her daughter, so she agreed. "The first couple of hikes were very hard for me. But, immediately I fell in love with the feeling that we could do it by ourselves."

Initially the most reluctant member of the group to get into shape, Burkhardt is now the one who makes sure that everyone is cared for and well fed. On a typical hike, the group takes a 15-minute morning lunch break after hiking four to five miles. Then half way through the hike, they take a longer break, taking off their boots and relaxing for a few minutes. Burkhardt always makes sure there is a recovery meal at the end of the day. "I'm trying to keep my muscles strong. I always make some chicken salad with some fruit, so we can eat right away." she says. "I'm never hungry on the trail, but as soon as I'm done, I'm starving."

Sometimes, Burkhardt's husband and son hikes with them, but their commitment isn't the same as the women. "It's a sense of empowerment for us. Girls were the cheerleaders in life," says Burkhardt. "Now, we don't need an escort in life. We can be outside and light a fire and lug a backpack." Like her sister and daughter, she has enjoyed their time together. "We have moments when you go around a corner and it's so beautiful and joyous," says Burkhardt. "It's the three of you tackling the same thing."

NEW PERSPECTIVES

Each of the women has been changed by their experiences on the Pacific Crest Trail. "For me, part of it is a spiritual experience," Machado says. "When I am walking, I feel like I am in God's country and it humbles me."

Her mom has seen a change in her daily schedule. "I've started to do my own solo hikes during the week. I'm addicted." Burkhardt says. Her friends are amazed at the change they have seen. "Two of my friends have agreed to go on a hike with me next week. People see that if I can do it, they can do it, too."

Gregory has discovered a new part of herself. "I found a peace out there that I hadn't really known. I am not thinking about tomorrow or yesterday. It's the only time that I am 100% in the moment." She still plans to hike a section of the PCT on her 50th birthday next June.

This time though, she will be well prepared for the adventure with her fellow hikers. "What's holding us together is the journey," says Machado. "We each want to hike every mile with our own two feet." ●

False Start

"At first, we took our time enjoying all the wildflowers. With the recent rain, they were everywhere," Jill Burkhardt says, "Then, mile 12 hit and I was done." Burkhardt was hiking from Boulder Oaks Campground to Desert View Picnic Area, a southern section of the Pacific Crest Trail, with her sister, Catherine Gregory, and daughter, Christine Machado. The group began the 16-mile hike at sunrise. "We weren't prepared," Gregory says. "We had no headlamps or warm clothing and not enough food or water." Machado was also freaked out. "I was so dehydrated. I remember feeling vulnerable to the many things that could go wrong out in the wilderness."

The group pressed on through the heat and 3,657ft climb in elevation. "My sister wanted to give up at various times, but there was nowhere for her to exit the trail so we had to press on," says Gregory. The group finally arrived at the parking lot just as the sun was going down, the temperature dropping into the low 40s. They rushed to their car for food and water, only to realize that their keys were locked inside. Fortunately, some 'through hikers' (those who hike the PCT in one pass) had pitched a tent nearby. "We crashed their party and asked if we could share their fire. They were very kind and obliged," Gregory says. "We were able to hear some of their tales of the trail as we waited for AAA." Two hours later, AAA came and opened their car. The group learned some important lessons about how to proceed with the rest of the PCT. "It made me realize that you really are out there on your own. I made a personal commitment to be better prepared for our trips." Machado says. "I also made it my mission to stress this to my hiking partners."