Three years ago, as a sophomore from A.C. Reynolds High School in Asheville, North Carolina, I stood on the Appalachian Trial, looking up at a glorious mountain. I was about to embark on Wilderness Trail, a weeklong, 60 mile backpacking trip. I was supposed to learn how to bear another’s burdens in selfless love. Yet, things changed when I found myself in unexpected and trying circumstances on the trail. In fact, the intended lesson of ‘bearing others’ burdens’ faded away; instead, I learned an invaluable and beautiful lesson that would later become a meaningful way of life: how to dance in the rain.

Wilderness Trail is a Christian organization founded by a minister in Asheville that takes groups of high school students on transformational weeklong backpacking trips along the Appalachian Trial. Students carry everything on their backs, pitch tents, purify stream water and cook their own food. On the first day, I was full of excitement and naïve confidence as I laced up my hiking boots. Our group leader talked with contagious enthusiasm as she reminded us of the motto of Wilderness Trail: “to bear one another’s burdens”. The logo, based on Galatians 6:2, was even printed on the back of the navy tee shirt we each received. She instructed us to approach this journey with an attitude of unconditional love and a goal to encourage and help our friends on the trail. I was full of assurance that I would leave the trail knowing how to bear others’ burdens in a martyr-like fashion. However, just three days later, I gave up hope on ever learning that intended lesson.

On the third day of torrential downpours, the rain was pounding down so relentlessly that it carved a stream down the center of the winding, uphill trail. I straddled the trail, awkwardly waddling up the mountain in frustration. The combination of slippery mud, pelting rain and soaked shoes nearly overwhelmed me and I forgot the beginning instructions of our group leader. I was so focused on each precarious step, trying to balance the weight of my own pack, that I couldn’t even begin to fathom carrying someone else’s burden. How could I bear another’s burden when I could barely stand under the weight of my own?

In that miserable moment, I realized I couldn’t make the rain stop, but I also couldn’t leave the trail. I could choose to continue to be miserable, or I could change my attitude. So, I stopped hoping the storm would pass and started dancing in the rain. I literally began to sing and skip along the trail as the rain pelted my upturned face. This stark change sparked a contagious joy within me. Suddenly, the skies weren’t so gray. When it continued to rain for the entire week, I chose to awake each morning with a resolution to rejoice that even rain couldn’t erode. I found that the people around me became reinvigorated as well.

Long after I left that trail, I still carry that unintended lesson with me. I was able to face long periods of waiting, disappointment and seemingly insurmountable difficulties with joy. It can be tempting to huddle under a tree, passively waiting for the storms in life, like a financial downturn or job difficulty, to pass. But why not throw off our misery and embrace the storms? I have found that I grow the most in courage and in faith in the stormiest times. I also made a recent discovery. Years after I learned to dance in the rain, I realized that I had inadvertently grasped the intended lesson as well. I wasn’t literally carrying anyone’s burdens. Yet, my ability to lock into an eternal spring of unalterable peace and joy helped lighten the load of those around me. Through my contagious attitude, I was actually inspiring and helping the people around me bear their own burdens.

While I was on the trail, I wasn’t ready to learn how to carry others’ burdens. Instead, I opened up my heart to an unexpected lesson: learning to dance in the rain. I am so grateful that I did. Perhaps it is the unintended, everyday lessons that truly shape us. If we open our hearts and minds to the unexpected lessons in life, we may learn more than we ever imagined.

\* I am currently the Distinguished Young Woman of America for 2012 (formerly known as America’s Junior Miss). This article is written as the Distinguished Young Woman of America and of North Carolina, looking back on lessons I learned from my home state. The audience is Our State Magazine, a magazine that goes to North Carolinian families and is devoted to travel, history, people and places of North Carolina. It serves as a connection to the things that make North Carolina great. It features many outdoors activities and many readers will likely have been to, or at least be familiar with, the Appalachian Trail. The magazine also sometimes features faith-based pieces.