

Universal Expedition

through Rockefeller State Park, Central Park, and Bear Mountain
with Friends of Access Israel (FAISR)

Written by Alexandra Nava-Baltimore

Friends of Access Israel (FAISR)

is a non-profit organization that works with countries around the world to provide universal accessibility for all people. Led by Executive Director, Jamie Lassner, they created The Universal Expedition. On August 1, 2021, The Universal Expedition, FAISR trip began trek #1 in New York. They collaborated with Paratrek and Access Israel for a two-week hike through Rockefeller State Park, Central Park, and Bear Mountain, welcoming a variety of participants. Together across 14 days, over 56 miles were hiked by people with and without cognitive and physical disabilities.

Through the collaborative efforts of Jamie Lassner and Omer Zur, founder and creator of Paratrek, the impossible for many were made possible for all. Zur and two team members traveled from Israel, and for the first time in the United States, debuted the 5.0 edition of the Trekker,

which has successfully covered grounds as low as the Dead Sea and as high as Kilimanjaro. An all-terrain wheelchair, referred to as a trekker, allows people with disabilities to hike in non-accessible terrain or routes through the manual operation of the rider and hikers. On this trip, people using the wheelchair ranged in age from 12 to 82.

Each day we hiked as a team; no matter who you were or what your story was, you became part of the group. On day 1 of hiking, Colton Robinson, his parents, along with another family member joined us. Robinson is a child model, appearing in a variety of ads, including those for Target. He is the first child who uses a wheelchair to be part of New York Fashion Week and has been interviewed on the Kelly Clarkson show. Despite his long accomplished resume at such a young age, Robinson is a selfless, passionate, and down-to-earth individual. When discussing his achievements



Colton Robinson and family enjoying a day out in Rockefeller State Park

and his future goals, Colton was humble and so fun to speak with. His strong spirit and determination consistently surfaced during the two intense hikes using the Trekker. It is his first time on it; fears, excitement, and questions about the unknown filled his face. As Omer Zur, Shir Segal, and Arnon Amit guided Robinson and his parents, they ensured the safety and comfort of this rider. That is always their first priority.

I watched his experiences evolve and change as his comfort and security

increased on the Trekker. At the same time, he began to understand what he is capable of when society doesn't typically believe that this is possible. Colton shared, "When I got there, I did not know what to expect, and I was a little scared, but when I was in the trekker and with people I could trust, I was not nervous anymore."

When we went off-roading in various locations in the park and outdoor spaces with Colton, Arnon would show Colton what we could do: climb large boulders, navigate narrow paths, and cross over fallen trees. As Omer and the team showed him what had to be done, it allowed for Colton to be comfortable, secure, and honest in sharing what he wanted to and what he did not want to do. Colton dictated what he was comfortable experiencing. Pushing the rider out of their comfort zone is a major aspect of the hikes, as many have never even thought of attempting hikes on this type of terrain. We do this by keeping the rider's desires and comforts at the forefront.

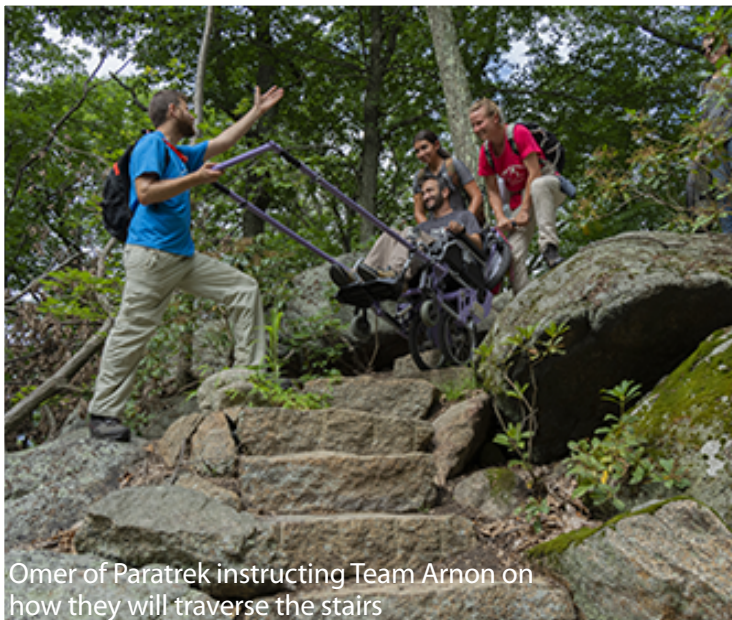
The team and trekkers arrived in New York City's Central Park during the first week, where we were joined by the Honorable Consul General of the State of Israel in NY, Israel Nitza. Our group had the pleasure of hearing him speak while the team shared the incredible Trekker and all it can do for people and their experiences. This resonated with the Consul General as he said, "Israel is proud to push to make more inclusivity for persons



Colton Robinson and family enjoying a day out in Rockefeller State Park



The Honorable Israel Nitzan, Consul General of the State of Israel addressing group prior to hike in Central Park
(Fred Maahs Jr and Arnon Amit first row, Jamie Lassner Baseball hat)



Omer of Paratrek instructing Team Arnon on how they will traverse the stairs



Team Alan enjoying the views during the FAISR Universal Expedition

with disabilities. Hiking is part of nature, and everyone should be able to enjoy it, especially during a pandemic." The world is full of beauty, and hiking allows you to be a part of incredible nature. Nothing should prevent someone from doing and experiencing that, especially

when a trekker can achieve that and more. He went on to say, "When hiking is accessible for everyone, it is a major victory for the world...We are bringing Israelis and Americans together, to support each other and to make this world a better place with innovative solutions

that suit the needs of our communities."

During our hike in Central Park, Tamar Schapira, an accessibility advocate, joined us and shared, "It was an eye-opening experience for me to take part in the expedition. I feel honored to be part of a community



The Chapel Haven Family getting off to a good start on day 1 of 3 hikes



Off-roading fun with Arnon Amit

of people that understand the meaning of diversity and inclusion from an accessibility perspective." Schapira is also the co-founder and CEO of SenselT, an automated testing solution for digital accessibility, the first of its kind. She went on to say, "This same community is those that embrace change

and welcome innovation in the accessibility space so that we can truly make a difference for people with disabilities in the near future."

The majority of our hikes took place at Rockefeller State Park Preserve, where the staff and team guided us through

many trails each day. Peter Iskenderian, the Park Manager who worked closely with us during our hikes and led a few as well, shared, "It was such an incredible experience working with Jamie Lassner and the people from FAISR to help organize the Access Israel Universal Expedition. It

showed me what amazing things could happen with individual commitment to a group effort." He shared his inspiration and goals for the future as this was the park's first experience of this kind. Typically, people in wheelchairs are limited to which trails and places they can experience. He went on to say, "From the team from Paratrek that created this incredible machine to the team from Chapel Haven that gives people with disabilities the freedom to express themselves and live independently."

Arnon frequently shared that 1,000 things make people the same; a trekker and a disability is one thing that can make people different. He went on to say, Why do we focus on what makes people different instead of what makes them the same? This statement was a guiding pillar throughout the trip for the team and me. Creating accessible

places doesn't affect people that are not physically or cognitively disabled.

Chapel Haven Schleifer Center, a Special Education school and resident community center, joined the expedition during the second week of our trip. Beginning half a century ago, Chapel Haven works to assist people starting at 18 years of age, and as their website states, "empowering them to live independent and self-determined lives." Focus is placed on honing into each individual's specific needs in order to create individualized programs for its adults. Chapel Haven brought over 50 people, including residents, staff, teachers, and others who successfully hiked throughout Rockefeller State Park among various trails, including reaching the top of Eagle Point.

Having the pleasure of knowing

Jamie for several years, I anticipated an incredible trip. And yet, I cannot even believe how life-changing it was. The people I met, the experiences we shared, and the teamwork we all took part in leading us from starting as individuals to bonding as a family by the end of the trip. Working together was so natural for us, and that showed in our ability to make the trip so successful for so many.

We were taken out of our comfort zones physically and emotionally as we completed morning and afternoon treks. Each day a new group was able to experience the expedition regardless of ability, race, religion, or age. After arriving as individuals, we left as part of a team working together for a total of 12 hikes, using communication, conversation, and a sense of togetherness.



BY FRED MAAHS JR.

I had the opportunity to participate in the International Expedition with Omer and team along with Jamie Lassner and Friends of Access Israel at Rockefeller State Park. The experience was personally rewarding and brought for me a sense of peace and serenity as we navigated the trails through the meadows and densely-wooded park. The ability to explore nature and finding ways to move around and over physical barriers during our trek, together, was moving. I cannot thank everyone who made this possible enough, especially those who were pushing and pulling me and my Paratrekker for nearly an entire day. Serenity found!"



Andrew Burbank in the Trekker

BY ANDREW BURBANK

From my experience, life with a wheelchair has not been easy, but I can do many activities on my own. When I was eight years old in 2004, that summer was special because I got to be away from my parents, and I have changed a lot because of that time. Seventeen years later, I have achieved an unusual goal as well: an unbelievable “accessible hike” thanks to Access Israel and the Paratrekker!

Jamie, Omer and their colleagues worked hard to make this experience unforgettable! My experience on the trail was extraordinary because the Team gave me an opportunity to be involved in a way I would not have been previously. Examples included going down to the river, being able to hike alongside my friends from Chapel Haven and having Shir help me be supported with a big blue cushion. It meant a lot to me to be able to get to the top without my parents, which I was appreciative of. This moment will remain in my brain forever!

In conclusion, an “accessible hike” is something I have always imagined myself doing. If people are interested, I would encourage them to try Universal Expedition at least once in their life. It is incredible! Happy traveling!



Deborah Margolis (pink hat in front) celebrates reaching peak of Rockefeller State Park

BY DEBORAH MARGOLIS

I love showing people that I can do things that they think I can't do. Sometimes I have to show myself that I can do things that I am not confident about accomplishing. Hiking in the Universal Hike with Friends of Access Israel is an example that I wasn't sure I could do and people may not have expected me to do. It is a confidence boost proving that you can accomplish anything that you set your mind to doing and can show people that you can do things that people think you can't do.

Best of all, with the Paratrek Trekker, a wheelchair accessible for hiking, my friend with physical differences could participate. I especially like that it takes a team to use The Trekker because it is more fun to work together and enjoy the amazing sights on the hike together. I got to ride The Trekker and I felt like I was the queen of the universe.

The Universal Hike is not just about walking. It takes planning, like packing and physical fitness. I stayed in a hotel by myself for the first time, that took confidence and skill too. If given the opportunity, I would love to join another Friends of Access Israel adventure.