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Revolutionize Your Life With an Outdoor Challenge

ONE INSPIRING WOMAN SHOWS YOU HOW | by cassandra overby

January	February	March	April
		 	
May	June	July	August
		<ul style="list-style-type: none">- sea kayaking- trailcross- orienteering- rafting- hiking	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- rope climbing- mountaineering- paragliding- bicycle racing- canoeing
September	October	November	December
		<ul style="list-style-type: none">- bouldering- race walking- backpacking- ziplining- rowing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- ski biking- dog sledging- skiboarding- ice climbing- creeking

Sport: Backpacking

Goal Date: Thanksgiving

- Find place to backpack
- Buy pass for trailhead
- Inventory boys' hiking backpacks
- Ask friends and family for backpacking gear
- Pick up food supplies
- NEED:**
 - First-aid kit
 - Flashlights/Headlamps
 - MAP!



Do you have trouble keeping your New Year's resolutions? Maybe you're thinking too small.

Whether it's to get outside more, hike farther or discover new trails, there's a cure for the common New Year's resolution. It's a big, bold, audacious yearlong challenge.

Think it can't be done? *Meet Beautiful Existence.*

We first learned of Beautiful Existence (yes, that's her legal name) and her signature yearlong challenges in early 2014, as she set out to spend the year trying every sport that REI offers gear for. In the process, she revolutionized her relationship with the outdoors, transformed her family dynamics for the better and spent an enviable number of days outside. And did we mention that she accomplished all of it as a full-time student, part-time employee and single mom to two active boys, ages 4 and 14?

"If I can be dedicated to the outdoors, anyone can do it," Existence says. Her journey shows you how.

Identify Your Passions

For Existence, the first step toward her successful yearlong challenge happened long before 2014 ever began. It was the day, four and a half years ago, when she finally identified what she was passionate about—the day her youngest son was born. Existence had just brought a new life into the world and realized that she needed a new, more passionate life of her own to go with it. In the hospital bed, she started scribbling a list of things she had always wanted to do. Shortly thereafter, baby and preteen in tow, she started fearlessly checking things off.

"I didn't intentionally set out to give myself a bucket list to live every single year," she says with a laugh. "But that's what it has become. And I couldn't have designed it any better."

Between that day in 2009 when Existence first

realized what she was passionate about and the day she started the REI adventure, she got plenty of practice in setting—and achieving—big, bold goals. She spent 2011 buying everything (except for groceries) from Goodwill. In 2012, she lived all of the advice from *Parents* magazine. Along the way, she slowly gathered a following for her unique goals, but it wasn't until 2013—and her aim to eat and drink entirely from Starbucks for the year—that she became an international sensation, featured in *USA Today*, the *Huffington Post* and *Good Morning America*.

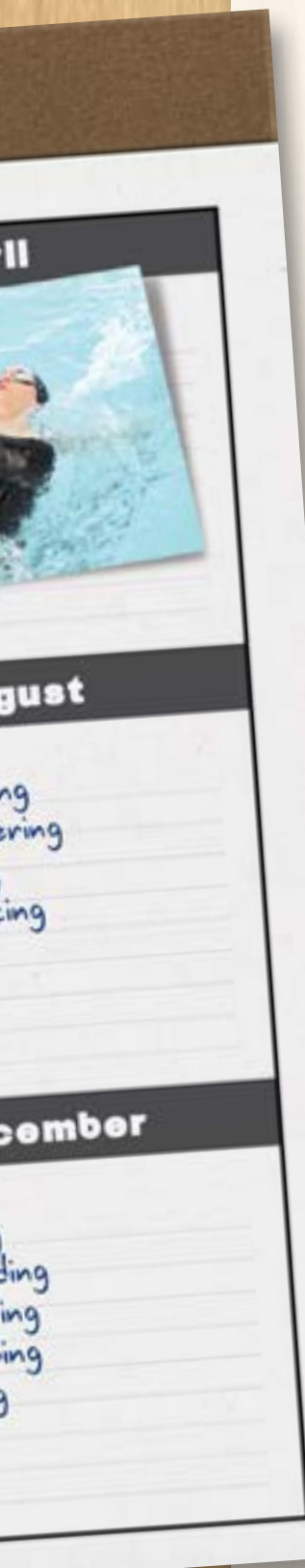
The media attention brought her more followers than ever before, but it also brought her criticism. Some people didn't understand her name. Others didn't understand her goals. She wasn't deterred. In fact, she was ready for her most involved challenge to date.

Eliminate Obstacles in Advance

Even though Existence was mentally prepared for her outdoor year, she knew there were several big obstacles to successfully completing her goal.

To begin with, she had never spent much time in the outdoors. She'd never trained for a marathon or prepared for an afternoon of dogsledding. She could count the number of times she'd been camping on one hand. There were other obstacles as well. She

“I was getting to experience something new, something I never would've known about ... sports that I don't think I would have ever tried.”



was on a limited income, had a packed schedule and wanted to include her sons in everything. So she dealt with those obstacles the best way she knew how: by meticulously planning everything.

That meant lots of research, months before even beginning her adventures. Existence immersed herself in the communities she wanted to be a part of, learning as much as possible about each of the sports she wanted to try. She sought out classes, looked for mentors and instructors, and tracked down used sporting equipment. She even wrote down all of the free state and national park days for 2014.

And then she did something she would come to rely on the whole year: she blocked off time for everything in her calendar. Activities were scheduled when they were seasonally appropriate and shorter adventures were planned for early mornings, school nights and weekends. Longer adventures were planned for school holidays; Thanksgiving became a backpacking trip. Existence even started working out with a trainer so she would be ready for a more active lifestyle.

Embrace the Change

And then it was January. It didn't take long before all of the preparations started to pay off and Existence got to try everything she had spent months researching, from snowshoeing to parkour to geocaching.

"I was getting to experience something new, something I never would've otherwise known about," she says. "I got introduced to sports—and introduced my sons to sports—that I don't think I otherwise would have ever tried."

Existence's revelations went beyond the sports she was trying.

"I started connecting with nature and really realizing how much more beautiful our state is than I ever knew. It's easy to forget how beautiful this place is when you get busy and you're a mom. You're going to school and taking kids here and there and entertaining friends in the city and doing stuff. But then you go [outside] and you can hear the birds and smell the forest. It gives you a completely different perspective on the world."

As the months flew by and her time outside multiplied, it wasn't just Existence's perspective on the world that was changing. She also noticed a shift in her family.

“When you commit to something ... you might be scared of it. You might be second-guessing yourself. But when you [do it] you're never going to regret it. You need to let yourself have those moments to look back on. There has to be a dedication and a determination to really make it happen.”



"I took my boys with me all the time, everywhere," she says. "Hiking. Snowboarding. For almost everything I did and every sport I tried I had one or both of my boys along. It changed how we spent time together. Instead of staying inside, we'd head out for evenings in the park. We'd go longboarding or skateboarding together."

Existence saw the biggest change in her youngest son, four-year-old Epic, who fell in love with camping and spent five months of the year sleeping in a tent in their living room instead of sleeping in his bed.

"Over the year, I saw less hesitation from them about getting outside and more enthusiasm," she says. "If it's raining, they grab their raincoats now instead of complaining about not wanting to go outside."

One of the family's favorite shared activities is hiking. "Hiking with the boys has been amazing," says Existence. "They love it. And I love getting them out of the city and experiencing new things."

In addition to sharing the yearlong REI challenge with her sons, Existence also used the opportunity to spend time with family and friends who were eager to participate—more so than with any other challenge she'd done. And there was an added benefit to sharing her adventures.

"If you have kids, friends and family that love you, if they see you doing something you're passionate about, it's going to light them up to do something they're passionate about too. It's super contagious to be living a life where you're doing something. It



Craft Your Own Yearlong Outdoor Challenge

- Set a yearly mileage goal
- Visit a new trail every week
- Walk across your city, county, state
- Spend 10% of your nights outside
- Set a days-on-trail goal
- Hike to work every day
- Backpack an epic trail
- Go on midweek adventures

Looking for inspiration from others who have set big outdoors goals? Check out wta.org/gobig.

really is. People can hear it, they can see it and they want to be a part of it. And they want to support you in it."

Be Determined—and Flexible

Even with the support of friends and family, getting outside and trying all of the sports that REI offers gear for was not always easy. There were some days when schedules collided, the kids didn't want to do a certain activity or it poured. At the beginning of the year, Existence had been diagnosed with plantar fasciitis and bone spurs in both heels. Even when everything else was favorable, getting outside still meant moving through the constant, dull ache of being on injured feet. On tough days, it was only her steadfast commitment to her long-term goal—and the belief in what she was accomplishing for herself and her family—that kept her going.

"When you commit to something, it's there," she says. "You might be scared of it, like jumping off of a mountain. You might be second-guessing yourself. But I'm telling you, when you step off that mountain you're never going to regret it. You need to let yourself have those moments to look back on. There has to be a dedication and a determination there to really make it happen."

One of the things Existence learned by facing pain and adversity in her yearlong challenge was to be flexible. Sometimes that required a "no excuses" mentality, like when she was tempted

to call off an adventure because of rain and instead grabbed better rain gear. Sometimes it required having a backup plan, like when paragliding was rescheduled three times because of poor wind conditions. And sometimes it required making a hard—but smart—choice, like when the pain in her feet got so bad when she was attempting to summit Mount Adams that she had to stop hiking and leave that adventure on her bucket list.

Having to be flexible taught her that the aim for a yearlong challenge should never be perfection and that such a grand goal truly is a journey, not a destination.

Relish Every Victory

Even when things were hard, there were breathtaking, awe-inspiring moments to lean on. Most of those moments were made even sweeter by the setbacks leading up to them, like the paragliding trip that was rescheduled over and over.

"I finally got to go paragliding at the end of August," Existence says. "Even that day, we were up on the mountain for 40 minutes waiting for the wind to turn. And there was a legitimate possibility while we were waiting that I wouldn't get to go yet again. I was

“I can see how people can get addicted to summiting. I didn’t get to achieve that goal—but I will. Every time I look at the snowy Olympics I think, I want to summit one of those mountains.”

starting to get really nervous. But all of that waiting, all of that dedication to rescheduling, was worth it when I jumped off that

mountain. I can’t even begin to tell you how happy I was. It was amazing. It felt like soaring, like being on the Titanic with your arms out in front of the boat.”

By living 2014 as a yearlong challenge, Existence made more heartwarming memories than some people make in a lifetime. All in all, she tried nearly 30 sports: backpacking, backstroke, breaststroke, butterfly stroke, cross-country skiing, CrossFit, dog-sledding, freestyle swimming, Frisbee golf, geocaching, hiking, letterboxing, longboarding, mountaineering, mountain biking, parkour, paragliding, rock climbing, sea kayaking, skateboarding, ski biking, slacklining, snowboarding, snowshoeing, stand up paddleboarding, TrailCross, yoga and ziplining. And she honestly can’t pick a favorite.

Luckily, she doesn’t have to. Although this yearlong challenge is drawing to a close and she is on the brink of starting another (this one revolves around music and trying a different instrument every day for a year), many of the new hobbies she gained from her REI adventure—from hiking to mountaineering to yoga—will stay big parts of her life. So will spending time with her kids outdoors. In fact, they’ve already started planning their camping trips for 2015, including one at the popular music festival South by Southwest. Some adventures from this past year remain on Existence’s bucket list, including summiting a mountain.

“I can see how people can get addicted to summiting,” she says. “I didn’t get to achieve that goal—but I will. Every time I look at the snowy Olympics I think, I want to summit one of those mountains.”

Her wishes also go deeper; Existence wants other people to follow in her footsteps. She isn’t talking about living REI for a year like she did but rather getting creative and finding your own way to revolutionize your life.

“This is what I tell my boys,” she says. “You define what you want to do, every single year. If you don’t do it for a living or at school, do it after school, after your job. Just get into it. Is it art? Music? The outdoors? I’m serious. It’s all out there. And whatever excuse or inspiration you give it, whether you’re a blogger or you just like something, really allow yourself to do it. Because once you start doing it and you look back, you’re like holy moly! This is awesome! You owe it to yourself to do what makes you happy.”

If there’s one last piece of advice Existence likes to give people who are just starting a yearlong challenge of their own, it’s to not be ashamed of where you come from and where you start.

“Your 2-mile hike in the Issaquah Alps is just as noteworthy as a person’s in the French Alps,” she says. “It’s absolutely legitimate. It might just be your backyard. It might be the Issaquah Alps. There’s nothing wrong with that. Look at pictures; inspire yourself to one day try and really hike the Alps in Europe. But while you’re here, while you have the feasibility of going 5, 10, 20 minutes away, take what you have. Because it’s where everybody has to start. It’s where you get to start. And there’s beauty in that.”

Whatever you do, just get started and think big. Your existence will be a little more beautiful because of it. ♦

