



At the top of Forester pass, in Trevor's opinion, "the hardest climb of the trail."

# Trevor Thomas overcame blindness to become a long-distance hiker with a mission

By **Mark Larabee**, *Communicator* Managing Editor

**T**revor Thomas was driving home one night in August 2004 and noticed he was having a little trouble seeing. He was 35, and the slight vision deficiency didn't surprise him. A lot of his friends had recently needed glasses and he was at that age.

So he went to his local Vision Works for an eye exam and to pick out a \$99 pair of glasses. But that simple step led to a year and a half of visiting specialists—including the best retinal doctor at Duke University—and getting a diagnosis that would change the course of his life.

Thomas, a resident of Charlotte, N.C., was told he had central serous chorioretinopathy, an rare disease in which the body's immune system thinks the macula in the eye is a foreign body and attacks it, killing the tissue.

"I was told I was going to be going blind and there was no cure," he says. "I thought I'd been issued a death sentence."

It certainly seemed like it was going to be the end of his passion for extreme sports. Before he lost his sight, the self-described adrenaline junkie spent much of his free time backcountry skiing, skydiving, mountain biking and racing Porsches.

He was in the prime of his life. His career in high-end corporate sales was soaring and he had just completed law school. His plan was to become a corporate lawyer and set himself up for life.

"Every day my vision got worse and my world got smaller and smaller," Thomas says.

The disease worked fast. By early 2006 he was totally blind. He couldn't drive; had to learn to walk with a white cane; and he couldn't buy food because he couldn't read labels.

"I went from being perfectly normal to having to learn everything all over again," he says.

Depression set in. If it wasn't for a good friend in Charlotte, who knows what would have happened? The friend "dragged" Thomas to see **Erik Weihenmayer** give a talk.

Weihenmayer, an accomplished mountaineer, reached the summit of Mt. Everest in May 25, 2001. He is the only blind man ever to climb to the top of the world's highest mountain. In 2008, he completed his quest to climb to the top of the Seven Summits, the highest peak on each continent.

Thomas spoke with Weihenmayer after the speech and the two have remained in contact.

“When I met him I was newly blind. I had one of my senses taken away from me for no good reason,” Thomas said. “I was depressed. But he encouraged me to get out on the trails. After that, I thought I’m going to find the hardest and most extreme trail close to me and that was the AT.”

Thomas worked at hiking, getting himself into shape for long distances.

“I cashed in my standard white cane for Leki trekking poles, which I use for balance and to find obstacles,” he says.

By the spring of 2008, he was ready. He took off from Springer Mountain, Georgia with the goal of being the first blind hiker to complete the 2,175-mile AT without assistance.

He fell 3,000 times before he stopped counting. He broke four ribs, two bones in his left foot and cracked his left hip and his skull.

“I wasn’t that good a hiker when I started,” he says with a laugh.

Then he gets serious and says that all those other sports he used to do, the ones he thought were extreme, have nothing on this. “Supposedly extreme,” he calls them.

Thomas has picked up sponsors and now gives motivational speeches. He hikes to raise awareness about blindness.

Last year he and a group calling itself **Team Farsight** completed the Pacific Crest Trail. Thomas said there are some sections of the PCT that he needed help with, especially when the group reached the Sierra snowfields. His teammates gave him mostly verbal clues. But he hiked from Mt. Hood’s Timberline Lodge to the Columbia Gorge unassisted, just to prove to himself he could.

But how does he stay on the trail? Thomas said his other senses have become more acute since his eyes failed.

“I can listen to the environment and tell where I am,” he said. “I can tell when I’m on trail by the feel under my feet.”

Now he’s at home working on a documentary film, which he said is a “slow-going process.” There are hundreds of hours of footage and more than 7,000 photos from his two long-distance hikes that need to be reviewed. And since he completed the PCT, he has spent much of the time meeting the needs of his sponsors.

That planned law career is no more. His sponsors fund his expeditions, supply the gear, and pay him to endorse their products.

“For a hiker it’s kind of a dream job,” he says.

In addition to the documentary, he’s preparing for his next hiking adventure. He’ll attempt the Continental Divide Trail this year.

“I’ll be the first blind person to complete the triple crown,” he says with a pause, “if I’m successful.”

“These days I don’t take anything for granted.” 🐾



**Above, left:** Trevor at the conclusion of his hike at the U.S./Canadian border. **Above, right:** Crossing a stream in Washington on the way to Skykomish with buddy Red Head in the background. **Bottom:** In the lava fields on the way to Sisters, Ore.