

## Life-long Girl Scout Creates First Girl Scout Hiking Trail



In the fall of 2016, Ellie Leonard of Girl Scouts of Western Ohio, now a college freshman at the University of New Hampshire, made history by finalizing the first-ever nationally recognized commemorative Girl Scout hiking trail dedicated to Juliette Gordon Low. At the same time, she earned her Gold Award, the highest honor a Girl Scout can receive. What an innovative leader!

Growing up as a Girl Scout heavily involved with the outdoors—hiking, camping trips, the works—Ellie was surprised to find there were many different Boy Scout trails across the country, but no official Girl Scout trail. So she took the lead like a Girl Scout, and got to work.

“For me, leading like a Girl Scout means being more inclusive and choosing the path that’s right for everyone. It means creating opportunities for everyone to shine and be themselves.” And that’s exactly what Ellie was able to accomplish by ensuring that future generations of Girl Scouts had a trail to call their own.

“Having an official Girl Scout trail creates a place where Girl Scout troops can go out and learn about Girl Scouting and that displays the importance of the outdoors, its deep connection to Girl Scouts, and its significance to everyday life,” Ellie said.

So how did she do it? While her original plan was to create a trail for Girl Scouts in a national park, Ellie quickly realized that was going to blow her timeline. Disappointed but undaunted, this go-getter decided to start smaller so she contacted a local park in Holland, Ohio, near Toledo where the very first Girl Scout council was chartered in 1917! Westwinds Metropark immediately responded to Ellie’s request with a big, enthusiastic “yes!” and the work to get the trail up and running began.

Ellie did what Girl Scouts do. They don’t let setbacks discourage them. Instead they find a way to forge ahead with a plan, armed with flexibility and creative thinking to get amazing things—like opening this trail—done.

Ellie and a team of volunteers went out to the park five or six times during the course of six months to clean up the trail, pulling out garbage, including a fridge, tires, and a stove—wow! At the same time, Ellie created a sign to mark the beginning of the trail as well as hiking medallions (the very first Girl Scout hiking medallion—this Girl Scout is on a roll of firsts!) and pins she sold to help pay for work on the trail.

“Completing this project gave me an incredible feeling. Almost 500 people came to support the opening of the trail when it was finished and dedicated on October 29, 2016,” Ellie said. “Everyone was so excited. It made all of the hard work that went into it more than worth it.”

During her many years as a Girl Scout, Ellie has also worked on countless food drives, baked pumpkin pies to donate to needy families on Thanksgiving, and even created a peace garden at her high school to make people more aware of different cultures. This consisted of painting bricks with the flags of different countries, placing them in the shape of a peace sign, and planting flowers inside the structure—*too cool!* And that’s just a few of the awesome projects Ellie’s undertaken as a Girl Scout. The best part is, now in college, these experiences are helping Ellie navigate a new world.

“I think my experiences as a Girl Scout are helping me navigate my first year in college because I’m more comfortable with myself. Walking up to and meeting new people and making friends—it’s easier for me because of my time in Girl Scouts. I am also more confident and self-aware, and more aware of other people’s needs. Girl Scouting has given me incredible opportunities, like going to Europe with my troop and attending the national convention in Salt Lake City my junior year of high school. It’s made me a better person and taught me so much.”

Ellie, we’re so happy and proud that you stood up and took the lead to give Girl Scouts everywhere their first official hiking trail—what an extraordinary accomplishment! Thank you for creating a legacy for future generations. You are the ultimate G.I.R.L. (Go-getter, Innovator, Risk-taker, Leader)™, and we can’t wait to see what you do next!