

**Burning River 100**  
**A journey of a lifetime starts**  
**One Step At a Time**

By

Patricia Burd



# Preface

I am not quite sure when the idea of running 100 miles entered my thinking. I do believe that the seed was planted when I was a young child playing in the woods (what we referred to as the Gully) at the end of the street of my childhood home. The gully runs through what is now West Creek Reservation and is part of the Cleveland Metroparks, which is one of the three park systems that the Burning River 100 course will visit. The West Creek watershed has influenced settlement and development patterns for two centuries. Remnants of abandoned quarries and the comfortable homes of quarry owners can still be found in the watershed, which drains the cities of Parma, Seven Hills, Brooklyn Heights, Independence, and portions of North Royalton and Broadview Heights before emptying into the Cuyahoga River.

I was never very athletic as a child. I swam on a team from age 7 to 12, tried baseball, and played pee-wee football for St. Anthony's for a couple of years. However, in general, my talents lay elsewhere. I played the piano and the standup bass, I was an above average student, and I had a genuine curiosity about life, its purpose, and my role within it. I did; however, show signs that endurance sports might be in my future. I could swim many miles, bicycle all day, and walk endlessly in my woods.

I was in my early forties, was at my unhealthiest, weighing 270 lbs, smoking, and completely inactive. Basically, I was on my way to a premature death and, honestly, I was pretty okay with it. My daughter at that time was about 6, and my son was a junior in highschool. Charlene and I had been married for about 18 years, and one day I woke up and made the decision that I was not ready to die. I wanted to be around for them, and I wanted to be healthy. Over the next fourteen years, not only would I find my health, I would start on a journey that ultimately would help me find me.

Even though these past 14 years have been some of the hardest in my life, experiencing the death of many close friends, the loss of a child, and nearly the loss of another, as well as, the complete upheaval of my life through the process of coming out as trans female, the reality is that every moment, every breath along the way, has brought me here, to the doorstep of the BR100, and more importantly, to the person I am today. Each and every step on this journey that is my life, is as important as any other. We have to remember that the happy and joyous steps are as equally important as the painful ones and that with each step forward we have the opportunity to redefine ourselves into our absolute best and most authentic versions.

This work is dedicated to my son, Kenneth Miles Burd, and each and every step I take, I lift you up and carry you with me.

# In the Beginning

The curiosity of a child is one of the greatest gifts God has bestowed on us earthbound humans. It is the source of just about every invention known to man. It is an amazing thing to watch and experience. It is honest, it is raw, and it is amazingly beautiful. Unfortunately, as we age that curiosity often times fades, and for some of us, may extinguish completely if we are not careful.

Personally, I was a very curious child, which sometimes was construed as mischievous. I liked to take things apart and often could not put them back together again. I liked to explore, whether it was just within our house, yard, neighborhood, or beyond. My curiosity was the foundation of so many things in my life, including my love of adventure. I remember those feelings of pure joy when packing a simple lunch (½ bologna sandwich, a couple of cookies, and my school thermos filled with grape kool aid), taking my wagon, and exploring the neighborhood, never leaving our block or crossing a street, and eating my lunch on the next street over, probably no more than 50 yards from my own backyard. As I grew older, my adventures became larger and longer and would typically involve lunch or other meals. Sometimes I would get lost while wandering the woods at the end of our street, but ultimately I would find my way home.

Growing up, my parents had a 26 acre piece of land near Ashtabula, Ohio, in Kingsville Township, which was only 10 miles to the Pennsylvania border. We called it the farm. In the summer we would spend every weekend there. We had a mobile home and had a yard that would take all morning for two people to mow. The lot was an acre or so wide, and behind the trailer were 10 acres of pine trees planted with the purpose of resale. However, the person who planted them spaced them way too close together. My Dad, literally, spent years trimming those trees, removing all branches to about 6 feet from the ground. This made very long rows which my brother, sister, neighbor friends, and I turned into trails. We made obstacles and jumps and would race each other through our makeshift course. One spring day, a kite that we let out with three lines of string, got away from us. The three of us chased that kite, and in the process we became completely lost. We found the kite and eventually found our way home hours later; our Mom was in full-on panic mode by that point, and I think we got grounded or something; however, it is an adventure I will never forget. My love of adventure and exploring has never faded, and I hope it never does.

When I travel, whether for work or pleasure, I love to go out and explore, and I believe that this has spurred my love of trail running. Getting out in the woods and running reminds me of my childhood and has the simplicity of packing a lunch and exploring, enjoying nature, and being one with my breath. It can be meditative, peaceful, beautiful, and raw, and it allows me to be completely authentic. It stirs that pure child-like curiosity in me and makes me feel completely alive.

My first ever 'trail-run' was the 2011 Chippewa 50K near New Auburn, WI, on the Ice Age Trail. As I recall, it was Holy Saturday, the day before Easter. It was late April, and it was a cold, wet early spring day.

The race report that follows tells the story of the day and concludes with what would ultimately get me to the 2017 Burning River 100.

*Race morning came early. I was up a half dozen times since midnight. It looked wet and foggy outside, but it did not look like it was raining, at least not hard. I had been debating with myself what to wear. My basic attire was set, but I had been wavering on an additional long sleeve shirt, winter hat or cap, and gloves. I finally decided that I would wear the winter hat, extra shirt, and gloves. I planned to switch to a ball cap style hat and to lose the gloves and extra shirt at the turn around. After getting dressed and loading the car, I had oatmeal, made a bagel with peanut butter, and poured a cup of Jo for the ride. It was raining lightly, and the fog was heavy as I made my way to the nature center where the race would start. During the 30 minute ride I reviewed my plan for the day ahead.*

*Nutritionally, I had a couple of hammer gels, Clif shot blocks, and a package of sport beans in my waist pack, and basically the same in my drop bag which would be available at the halfway point. I had a five hour energy mixed in my water bottle, which I planned to carry, and one in my drop bag. I also had my cap in my drop bag. I pulled into the parking lot atop the grassy hill at 06:30, where the nature center sat overlooking one of the many kettle lakes along the trail. It was still raining lightly, and the air was cool. It was 35 degrees F. I was one of a half dozen or so cars in the lot. I finished my bagel and coffee during the ride and ate a banana while I sat in the car thinking of the adventure that lay ahead.*

*At 07:00, after losing a layer, I did a 3/4 mile warm-up and ran down to the stop sign at the site's entrance and back. Apparently, 50K is just not enough. What was I thinking?*

*At 07:30, I headed into the nature center which was now milling with 150+ runners and their support groups. The time passed quickly, and soon we were hearing the last minute race instructions from the race director and a few words from Randy wishing us well on the day that was ahead.*

*The rain stopped and the fog still lingered as the Ready, Set, Go was given to the group.*

*The start/ finish line is atop the grassy hill out the back of the nature center. The course heads down the hill out towards the road, along the road, back up the entrance road before heading along the edge of the woods, and finally into the woods. I mentally noted the steep downward spiral as I briefly thought of what that will be like when finishing. The thought quickly escaped as we hit the 2 mile marker which was just out the front of the nature center, across the parking lot, and only a few hundred yards into the woods. This, too, briefly went into and out of my thoughts. I had run two miles and had yet to leave the shadow of the nature center. This also quickly*



*passed as my focus turned to the single track trail ahead.*

*There were mile markers for the first 5 miles, and the first aid station was at about 3.5 miles out. I had yet to even sip from my water bottle, so there was no need to stop here. The trail was already mentally challenging; the ups and downs were constant. The trail wended back and forth, and I hardly even saw the surrounding beauty. More focus was on the ground, within a five foot window of my feet. Before we entered the woods I was concerned about the proximity of the other runners, but by the time we were on the single track trail the group spaced out, and within the first 5 miles, only a few runners were even visible to me. I had been running with the same group to this point. In addition, a black dog with a shaved spot on his lower back seemed to be lapping me. He put a smile on my face when a couple of times, while climbing one of the steeper hills, he looked back as if to say, "Hey, you coming or what"? Before long, he too seemed to disappear into the woods.*

*When I came upon the first of many heavily soaked muddy sections, I tried to avoid the deepest spots. The water was cold as it made its way into my new Asics Trail Attack 7 shoes. I had bought the bright yellow and black shoes just a few short weeks ago. I had put about 45 miles or so on the shoes, and they were comfortable enough. The uppers were mesh and did little to keep the cold water out. I just about lost my shoes through some heavier muddy sections when the suction about pulled my gear from my feet.*

*At approximately mile 13 on the way out and 17 on the way back there was one of the many obstacles on the course. We had to climb over a barbed wire fence. There was this wooden gate stair thing that aided the travelers. On the way back I just had to stop and take a picture. The lady wearing light blue in front of me, Lisa I later found out, had been in close proximity from the start. On the way back she would pull away on the down hills and I would reel her back in on the ups. She ended up finishing about 5 minutes ahead of me and won her age group. Along the trail were wooden bridges, crossing creeks and marshy areas. Most were little more than two 2 x 8's and were plenty slippery with my wet, muddy shoes.*

*I took my first fall at 16.6 miles, a barrel-roll down a small hill off the trail. My second was about 10 miles later when I tripped over a root and did a face plant. Good thing the ground was soft. Does a runner falling in the woods make a noise? Yes, but no one other than me was there to hear or witness these acts of gracefulness.*

*I did as planned and made the switch at the halfway point, losing a layer, the winter hat and gloves. I had only eaten one gel on the way out, and I dumped the revved up water long ago for just plain H<sub>2</sub>O. I left all my additional supplies in my drop bag.*

*The race leaders passed me about 1.8 miles from the turn-around, so they were 3.5+ miles ahead and looked strong. The lead female runner passed me less than a mile later. The Garmin indicated 15.4 miles on the way out. I was just over 2-1/2 hours into the day. My legs felt a bit wobbly. I did not feel hot, but my shirts were soaked in sweat.*

*At about 18 miles I could no longer feel my toes on either foot. They were completely numb from the cold, muddy water. It was several hours later on the ride home before I could start feeling them again. The uphill and downhill portions seemed steeper on the return trip on the out and back course. There were multiple times on the way back that stopping seemed much more appealing than continuing. When I went by the 26.2 mile point, the thought of another 4.6 miles seemed absurd. In the weeks leading up to the event my long run was just over 20 miles. I had run a total of about 6.5 miles on actual trails, nothing like the ones I was running on today. I had no right to have any real expectations for the day. If I finished, I was guaranteed a PR.*

*The 5 mile marker was a welcomed sight and a curse. 5 more miles on this trail was not a comforting thought. I managed to keep plodding forward, one foot in front of the other. I was trying to push all thoughts other than forward motion out of my mind. When I broke out of the woods back into the grassy hills below the nature center I could only see one other person in front of me. The climb up those last hills was a cruel joke. When I crested the last hill and was but a few hundred yards from the finish, I mustered up a jog and crossed the line.*

*According to the Garmin, the round trip was 30.79 miles, with 8010 ft of total ascent. I burned nearly 5000 calories. My muscles were sore, my feet agreed, toes were numb, and I was grateful that this adventure was over. Before running this event I was told that running trails was easier than running on the road. I was also told that this course was relatively flat. I've gained a new appreciation for those who run these types of events. It was without question one of the most challenging endurance events for me yet. Prior to this I had fleeting thoughts of maybe trying some longer trail runs next year, maybe even a 100 miler. Now I can only just try to take this all in and let it marinate for a while.*

Well, now more than 6 years later, the marinating is almost complete. Over the next two weeks I will make my final preparations for my first (and maybe only) attempt at completing a 100 mile trail run. I am positive that this first 50K race and all the others that have ultimately lead me to the start line at Burning River will fill my thoughts and bring me a source of strength that I will surely call upon.

# The Training decision

The idea of running a 100-mile Ultra has been floating around in my head since that first 50K Ultra in 2011, the Chippewa 50K near New Auburn, WI, on the Ice Age Trail. However, it was not until last summer that this started to solidify. I did already have my race picked out years ago, the Burning River 100, which is a stone's throw from my origins. The race travels through three of Northeast Ohio's premier park systems, the Cuyahoga Valley National Park, the Cleveland Metroparks, and the Summit Metro Parks, but more on that later. My more immediate concern was how to train for a 100-mile trail run.

A couple of years ago I started to do some of my workouts with a tri club, and in addition to meeting some absolutely amazing people, I also met my future coach and mentor. This guy was iconic in the ultra world (at least to me) and had completed more ultra-distance events than I could ever imagine. He was very experienced, knowledgeable, and in addition, a super-nice guy and friend. We started training in September 2016, 11+ months prior to Burning River, I was excited, and he was fully engaged in the journey.

Long story short, the train left the track (as they say) a couple of months later. I attribute the breakup primarily to poor timing on both our parts. My work travel schedule that fall and winter was off the charts, traveling to Europe 6 times in 4 months, including 2 weeks to start the new year. He was focused on a change to establish himself in the training world, and it became evident that we were no longer singing from the same hymnal. It was an excruciatingly difficult decision which led to tremendous self-doubt that the 100 was going to happen (ever).

I had already registered for a series of runs that would lead me to my goal (or so I thought), 3-50Ks and 2-100ks. Two of the 50Ks were in Ohio and would be run on parts of the BR100 race course. The other 50K was local to the Twin Cities. The 100Ks were travel races, North Dakota, and Iowa. The year started roughly, and my first three events quickly went from 50Ks to 25Ks. My confidence was diminishing quickly while serious doubts were starting to mount. I was questioning everything at that point and felt defeated and deflated. In addition to the running events, I also planned a few early season Olympic distance triathlons and was hoping that maybe those would start to turn my confidence in the right direction.

## Time to Train the Brain

My confidence was dropping faster than the Dow Jones on Black Monday, September 29, 2008, when it fell 777.68 points and resulted in the Indices' largest single-day decline in its history. I had been riding a wave of success in my somewhat short endurance sport career which started in September of 2005 when I finished my first triathlon, a half-iron (70.3) distance event. I had never DNF'd (did not finish) before, and up until this past year, my overall speed and endurance had been on the rise (for this middle of the pack athlete). The reality is that my physiology has been changing for well over a year now and comparing athletic performance from any previous period in my life is a foolish endeavor.

Starting in January, I had three successive events that I either dropped out of at the halfway point or changed the distance prior to the start. The first was the Buckeye Trail 50K in late January. I was registered for the 50K and dropped out after 18 miles (a little more than halfway). The event organizer planted the seed before the start with the declaration that you could drop at 25K, 18, or 26.2 miles, which were also event distances being contested, and still receive a finisher's medal for that distance. It was a cold, wet, and snowy northeast Ohio morning. My feet were numb well before I dropped, and the thought of dropping was an overwhelming consistent thought for a good portion of the last 6 miles. All of this run was on parts of the same trail I would run later that year during the BR100 and which I had previously run in November a few months before. It is 99% single track with many significant technical sections with steep climbs and descents, lots of rocks, roots, stairs, and stream crossings. This race started and finished, basically at the BR100 halfway point, so a portion was the last several miles of the front-half 50 and 4-miles of the first part of the back-half 50. The Burning River event offers both a front-half and back-half 50 mile run that is conducted simultaneously to the 100 mile event. Participants are given 15 hours to complete the front half and 16 hours for the back. The individual 100 mile participants must complete the entire course in 30 hours to qualify for a finisher's medal.

My next outing was also in Ohio at the Buzzard Day 50K in March. Again, it was a fairly cold Northeast Ohio spring morning. Within the first mile of the run we crossed our first water obstacle, and the water was ice cold. My feet never warmed, and I ended up with mild frostbite. I dropped at 25K. The race director (although a super sweet guy) made me feel even worse when he went on and on about "quitting is forever, pain is temporary" when I declared my drop status. This event was contested just 10 miles south of my childhood home. Growing up I had so many amazing adventures here, and those wonderful memories flooded my brain and distracted me from my frozen toes. I remembered picnics here with my mom, sledding, exploring Whipps Ledges with Charlene, and I remember the pure joy of bringing my son Christopher fishing in the lakes we circled. When I nearly buried my mom's car trying to get out of the muddy field which was being used as a parking lot, I was in tears over my epic fail. It literally took the rest of the day for my feet to thaw, which felt like they were being stabbed by a million pins.

This reminded me of something when I was a kid. I was traveling with my Dad home from a swim meet; I may have been 10 or so. We were in our 1972 Chevy Camper Special pickup. I loved this truck with its dual gas tanks and batteries; however, on this day we had trouble with a frozen fuel line. There was a massive snow storm, and we were on Rockside Road in Independence, Ohio, maybe 8 miles from home. My Dad tried switching to the other tank, no success. So he got out, grabbed some tools from the back, and crawled under to try to fix it. Although I was scared, I got out to try to help him. He ended up with severe frost bite and nearly lost both his hands, which developed massive blisters. I remember crying (from the pain) as my mom ran luke warm water over my hands.

Prior to my next run, the Lake Rebecca 50K, I changed my entry to the 25K. I was traveling for work and was leaving for the UK the afternoon of the event. Although it would have been logistically impossible to finish the entire 50K and still get to the airport on time, it was just one more brick of doubt that was now being piled on top of an already weakened spirit, and it was only a matter of time before the weight would be more than I could bare and would crush me once and for all.

I returned to the pool, swimming with SEMS (South East Metro Sharks), this past September. I've been swimming consistently (when I am not traveling), and this spring and summer have felt amazing in the water. As a matter of fact, my times in practice are equivalent or better than my life-time best times. Technically, I am not currently eligible to swim for official times in a USA or USMS Swimming sanctioned event. I have been working with USMS to document my transition and I will be able to compete on August 31, 2017, for official times. I have, however, participated in three triathlons and two open water swims including the Lake Harriet 1 & 2 Mile swims and the Lake Rebecca 5K swim. My times in the water have been surprising, to say the least, and have helped to spark my confidence wick.

Building on my success in the water, I competed in my 11th Buffalo, 1st Liberty, and 3rd Clearwater triathlons in June/July. I had some success with them, and as long as I do not try to compare my results to previous years, I am happy and proud of what I've accomplished in that arena. The week prior to Memorial Day weekend, I had a 30-mile (a 50K) training run planned. It was the weekend before my 100K event in Booneville, Iowa. That training run was the primary turning point in my training and helped put me on a trajectory to start the BR100 this Saturday, July 29, 2017, physically and mentally prepared.

It was a cool, wet, and windy, Sunday morning. I put on my wet weather running gear and set out on one of my most challenging and rewarding runs in a very long time. The run was primarily on pavement and did not include a tremendous amount of ascent; however, the conditions were horrendous and seemed to deteriorate as the run progressed. It was in the low 50's, raining, and very windy. You never know what you will get for weather in Minnesota. I was able to draw on some inner strength that I was afraid no longer existed and pushed through to what eventually would be just over 30 miles at an average pace just this side of 14:00 / mile. I

was sore and happy beyond words, and I actually cried during the last mile and a half. Even though I don't think I could have gone another ¼ mile, suddenly, I felt like my goal, although still far reaching, was at least a glimmer of possibility. Less than a week later, I traveled to Booneville, Iowa, where I would attempt to run twice as far as I had gone, 100K (62.5 miles) at the Backwoods 100K.

### **Booneville Backwoods 100K - Race Report**

When I left Cottage Grove on Friday, May 26th, on my way to Booneville, Iowa, for my first attempt at running 100K, I stayed at Sterling Hotel & Suites, where I had a large suite with my own full kitchen. After driving (20 Miles) to where the race would start, the Booneville Bar & Grill, across the street from a grain mill, which was a huge swing and miss since packet pick up was actually in town at a local running store. I found my way to the store eventually, picked up my packet, and was off to find some dinner.

Race morning came early with a planned start time of 6:00 AM. The alarm at 3:30 AM was not welcomed at all. I left my hotel around 5:00 and traveled to the Booneville Bar & Grill which I had visited briefly the evening before. Parking was behind the grain mill and the participants gathered in the parking lot of the bar/restaurant. The race director, Steve Cannon, is an accomplished ultra athlete and author of 40 Days, which shares his story of running 1037 miles around the perimeter of Lake Michigan. He is an inspiring human and a super sweet guy who absolutely loves the sport. This was the kind of race I love, an organic, grassroots effort, put on by people who are more about helping others achieve their goals than making a buck.

There were about 30 people registered to run the 100 mile course and about the same for the 100K. There is also a 50K and 10K option with maybe another 100 or so participants. The course is unique for the 100 mile distance. These participants run the 100K, 50K, and 10K courses, successively, to make up their 100 mile journey. The course was primarily on dirt or mud roads. Level B roads was a term I had never heard until that morning. These are low maintenance farm roads that when muddy were impassable to anything other than a tractor, 4 wheelers, or possibly a jeep or equivalent. Steve cautioned that any crew attempting to cross these roads would see their runner disqualified. The 100 mile and 100K runners started together on this very foggy late May morning.

We walked about a mile to the start/finish line accompanied by a couple of bagpipe players. It was eerie in the fog and kind of felt like a funeral procession. I was not really nervous, I was determined, and made my mind up the weekend before that I would find a way to finish under the 18-hour time limit (17:22 min / mile pace). After a quick pit-stop, a prayer, and the anthem, we were off.

Within the first 4 miles I found myself pretty much alone, toward to back of the pack. With the dense fog it was tough to see runners near me. The course was relatively flat with just shy of 4000 feet of elevation gain over the 100K course. As the day progressed I was surprised by the

Iowa landscape. It was beautiful, lots of farms, but also lots of trees, valleys, creeks and streams, including 3 of the famous Madison County covered bridges. At mile 19, the threat of storms seemed to appear out of nowhere, and the threat became a reality as the skies opened up to a fierce but brief thunderstorm. Lightning, thunder, sideways driving rain, strong winds, I smiled to myself as I thought about my rain gear in my mile 42 drop bag.

As often happens in runs, you find yourself around the same group of people pretty much the entire race. Sometimes you get to talk and meet some amazing people. I had some idle chit-chat with a dozen or so of the 30 participants throughout the day. I never really spent enough time with any one person to really get to know them. The aid stations were fairly sparse on the course with an average distance of about 11 miles or so. I personally thanked as many of the volunteers as I possibly could. I would change shoes three times during the day and wished I knew the course a little better so that the placement of my shoe changes would correspond to the changing road conditions, particularly the aid station at mile 30. When I left the mile 22 aid station I was thinking that getting to 42 to change into a pair of my favorite Zoots was a grand idea. However, the 6 miles of level B roads with their amazing mud lay in my way. These roads were ridiculous, I could barely stand up, let alone run on them. My feet sunk 4 to 6 inches into the reddish brown goop. The accumulation of mud on my shoes felt like cement, and I had mud along with plenty of small pebbles making their way into my shoes. The gal in front of me face planted as she completely came out of her right shoe. When I asked her if she was okay and needed any help, she smiled and said, "No, it's okay, my crew is just around the corner with a fresh pair of shoes". We climbed out of the mud right at mile 30 and right into the aid station. As I sat on the ground trying to clean my feet and shoes with a stick and some paper towels, I saw her with her crew in their van and maybe 6 people working on her to get her cleaned up, shoes changed, fed, water bottles refilled, and back on the road.

I eventually got my socks changed and shoes back on, water bottles refilled, grabbed a turkey and cheese sandwich, and was off. The next aid station was 12 miles away, my feet really started to bother me as the weather started to heat up. My shoes were filled with some pebbles and if I really thought I could do something about it I would have stopped to take care of it. I plodded on, was within my time window, and was still moving forward. I ran out of water (I carry about 48 ounces of water when full, in three water bottles) with 4 miles to go to the next aid station. I sucked on a Jolly Rancher to distract me from my growing thirst. When I finally pulled into the mile 42 aid station, I was feeling very tired. The volunteers at this aid station were like angels sent from heaven. They took off my shoes for me and thoroughly cleaned my feet and between my toes. These two guys were on their hands and knees in front of me as I sat in a chair, and a third was filling my water bottles and stuffing my food baggies into my pack. They were very encouraging and commented that my feet were the best they had seen all day. Feeling refreshed after downing several cups of heed and two cups of warm chicken soup, I was off for the final 20 miles.

At the last manned aid station, which was at mile 53, these gals were having a grand time, jamming to some good old rock- and- roll and dancing about. They filled my water bottles, they

asked if there was anything else they could get me, and I said that a shot of bourbon would be nice. A guy from behind the tent appeared and said, "I think I have some Jack in the truck." I kindly smiled and replied that it might not be a good idea at this particular point. As the sun set and the darkness once again crept in I played the math game in my head, calculating and recalculating the remaining distance and time left to ensure I would finish before the cutoff. At times I felt like I could go faster, but I worried that I would cramp up or worse, so I kept at my current pace and strategy of briskly walking  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile and jogging the other  $\frac{1}{2}$ . This strategy worked the week before on my 30 mile training run and had gotten me within 10 miles of the finish here.

Once it was completely dark, I occasionally saw a headlamp in the distance, but for the most part I was alone. Suddenly, a car seemed to appear from nowhere and roared towards me. I hoped they saw my headlamp; however, I was prepared to jump into the ditch if necessary. They skidded to a stop right next to me, rolled down the window, and were mocking and yelling. I was afraid, put my head down, and just proceeded. A car full of drunk teenage boys was not something I was expecting to have to deal with. Thankfully, after what felt like an eternity, they sped off in the opposite direction, leaving me alone once again.

My Garmin died with a few miles left. Oh, I forgot to mention that the course was completely unmarked. I had printed the 3x5 cue cards a couple of days ago and had them in a sandwich bag. This worked amazingly well throughout the day, and were well written; however, I relied on my Garmin since the turns were primarily indicated by mileage markers. Once my watch was dead I was concerned about making a wrong turn since many of the street signs were MIA. I found my way the last few miles, and it was mostly uneventful, other than the wave of emotion that started to overwhelm me as I approached the last mile or so and could see the lights of the cars and such around the finish area from across the field. Tears of joy leaked from my eyes as I rounded the final bend in the road and made my way to the finish line.

There were a few people mingling around, some of the 100 milers were preparing to head back out. I took a couple of selfies with my finisher's medal, wished those heading back out well, and had some fruit. As I was headed out back to my car, Steve was just pulling in. He had been out on the course, refilling some of the unmanned water stations and setting up an additional one. He said "Hey, that medal looks really sexy on you", I smiled. After thanking him for everything and how grateful I was for this opportunity, I asked about my drop bags. He said to go get a good night sleep and a good breakfast and come back around 10:00 AM the next day and that they should be back by then as the final 100 milers finish up.

I finished a 100K! I finished at 20 minutes before the midnight cutoff time. My goal was achieved, my body ached in a way it has never ached before, but it felt absolutely amazing. Burning River was 2 months away and for the first time since signing up in October, I honestly felt like I just might be able to find a way to cross that finish line too.



# The Life 100

Theodore Roosevelt's speech "Citizenship in a Republic" was delivered at the Sorbonne in Paris, France, on April 23, 1910, and was made famous by the following passage:

*"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat...."*

Brené Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston, author, scholar, and popular public speaker who was launched into the public eye after her TedxHouston talk "The Power of Vulnerability" went viral on YouTube, believes that vulnerability is the birthplace of love, creativity, and joy, and ultimately what she terms living a wholehearted life. In her 2012 book *Daring Greatly: How Daring the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*, she explores the idea that to live a wholehearted life, a life where we feel true connection to others and to the world, requires us to have the courage to embrace our own imperfection and to truly allow ourselves to be seen, really seen. As humans we need connection to survive; we are hardwired for it, and through vulnerability and the belief that we are enough and deserving of love, we may ultimately find pure joy and happiness. If you have not seen her 2012 TedXHouston talk I highly recommend the 20 minute investment.

( [https://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_on\\_vulnerability](https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability) ).

I personally have a strong belief in connection, that we are all connected with each other and with this great and magnificent universe, and that each and every one of us plays an important role in this life. Only together can we progress and make this life a healthier, happier, and love-filled place of existence. Our challenge; however, is that we have to let go of who we think we should be. We need to let go of the fear and shame we harbour about how we believe others might think of us if they really knew us. In addition, we need to silence our own self-defeating thoughts that we are not worthy of their love. We have to open ourselves up to that fear and shame and to our own imperfect beauty and believe we are worthy of connection and love from others. It is through our vulnerability and our authenticity that we allow others to truly see us and is the foundation of our connection to the universe.

For me, attempting to complete the 100 mile journey that is the Burning River 100 is a mere microcosm of the Life 100. Each of us is on our own Life 100 journey, and to be fully present and embrace our life's journey, we have to allow ourselves to be truly seen, vulnerable, authentic, and willing to "Dare Greatly". We are the "Man in the Arena" willing to fight, willing to try, and willing to fail, willing to embrace both the pain and sorrow of defeat and glorious joy, gratitude, and happiness of victory. We have to have the willingness to enter into the arena with the full knowledge that the outcome is not guaranteed and that we may not make the full distance. In the end we will know that we had the courage to "toe the line", to be "all in" and that we gave everything we had to give, to ourselves and to everyone around us.

## The Burning River 100



I arrived in Cleveland on Wednesday, a couple of days prior to the race. I'd be staying with my Mom in Parma, about 20 miles from where the race would both start and end. On Thursday, I prepared my drop bags, of which I had three, each containing a pair of shoes (for different purposes) food bags, treats, various medical supplies, and gear for changing conditions. Packet pickup was not until Friday afternoon, so I tried to spend as much time as possible off my feet.

On Friday afternoon, my Mom and I drove the 35 minutes or so to the Sheraton in downtown Cuyahoga Falls. We lucked out with a close parking spot and started to make our way inside. I overheard a couple talking as they walked out about drop bags. Chawaza! I forgot my drop bags in my Mom's living room! So after a short pity-party, we climbed back into the car to make the round trip home and back. Packet and swag pickup was a breeze, no lines, no waiting. I bought a few other race gear things in advance and picked them up as

well. As we made our way out of the registration hall we caught the end of one of the race briefings. The race directory was just starting a Q&A session, so we mingled and listened for a while. The only thing that really stuck was that the course was fairly dry as opposed to some previous years and that the aid station cut-off times would be strictly adhered to.



We went to Olive Garden for dinner, and I had the traditional pre-race spaghetti dinner. After dinner we went to East Coast Custard, "The Original Custard". According to Wikipedia, frozen custard was born at Coney Island, New York, in 1919, when vendors began adding egg yolk to their vanilla ice

cream to make it extra smooth and creamy. Frozen custard was enormously popular through the Depression and war years because it was delicious and inexpensive.

Real frozen custard is hard to find these days because by the 1960's custard makers, in an effort to increase profits (big surprise), began reducing the cream (butterfat) content and increasing the amount of overrun (air) in their products.

I had vanilla (my favs), and my Mom had a double with mint chocolate chip and strawberry. I took a couple of photos to send to Charlene; East Coast is a must stop when we are home, so I had to let her know that I was upholding my end by going and having some for us both.



Friday evening was a little bit of a blur. My sister and her family were returning from vacation, where they spent a week in New Jersey visiting my brother-in-law's family. They were just spending the night and continuing their drive home to Hampton, IL, on Saturday. My sister's birth father had passed away, and they were going to the funeral in Marble Head on Saturday. We spent maybe an hour chit-chatting before heading up in an attempt to grab a couple of hours of sleep. The plan was to be up at just after midnight and leave for the race at 1:15: AM. I needed to get back to the Sheraton where I would then climb on a school bus

at 2:15 AM for the ride to Squire's Castle.

The castle is now a shell of a building located in North Chagrin Reservation of the Cleveland Metroparks in Willoughby Hills, Ohio. It was built in the 1890s by Feargus B. Squire for use as the gatekeeper's house for his future country estate, which was never built. Squire, an executive with the Standard Oil Company, bought the surrounding 525 acres of land but never completed the project. Squire sold the property in 1922, and the Cleveland Metroparks acquired it in 1925.



We arrived at the start line about 3:30 AM, and the race was to start at 4:00 AM. I stood in line for the opportunity to use one of only four porta-potties available. I took care of business and then made my way up the hill just in time for the singing of the national anthem and the command to start.

The RaceJoy app that I'd be using all day for course guidance and to allow my family and friends to track me throughout is dependant on a data connection, of which I had none. It was not until a couple of miles into the race that the app finally connected. It didn't seem like a big deal at the time, and ultimately wasn't; however, it was 27 minutes off all day which messed up my overall duration, pacing, and estimated finishing time.

The first 11 miles were uneventful, and the only thing that really stood out was that it was in the dark and primarily on pavement. I remember passing this massive home under construction in Gates Mills. The house (more like an estate mansion) was one of the largest I think I have ever seen, with what looked like several guest houses, garages, etc., all being built simultaneously.

The first aid station was at mile 7; there would be a total of 23 aid stations throughout the 100 mile course. I do not know what the actual average distance was between them, but it was pretty close to 5 miles on average. My first drop bag was at Shadow Lake at mile 22, where I had planned to switch to my well broken-in Saucony Peregrine 7 trail shoes. I started the day in one of an identical (other than color) pair of Altra Lone Peak 3 that I had planned to wear throughout the day.



The final set of shoes was a very new pair of Hoka Clifton 3's that had only about 7 miles on them. They were planned for the final 11 miles, which was primarily on pavement.

The course turned to single track at mile 23. The trails were soft, yet dry, and my feet felt pretty good in the Altra's and I started debating with myself since I opted not to switch shoes at the aid station I had just passed a mile back. I had to wait to use the bathroom and lost more time than I would have liked. There was one restroom at the aid station, and I felt like this was a significant oversight.

I started to listen to some music about this time; I had my phone continuously plugged into my portable lithium battery which weighed several pounds (need to rethink that one) and when placed in the front pocket of my Ultimate Direction running pack, speaker up, sounded great without the use of headphones. There were a couple of ladies who I would cross paths with several times throughout the day. I would later find out that Nira was from Chagrin, Ohio, and ran the front-half 50 last year, and Rachel, who played the role of sherpa last year for Nira, was from DC. It was their first 100. These women were fierce athletes, and I often felt that I may never see them again on the course as they cruised by. Ultimately, we ended up running about 12 miles together on the first portions of the back-half 50. I am truly grateful for the energy they shared with me. We once again found each other around mile 52. I was really feeling bad at that point. I missed a turn at mile 51.5 and did an extra ½ mile out and back. Thanks RaceJoy for the warning; however, it would have been nice to get it a tad bit earlier.

My ultimate demise; though, actually started much earlier in the day. Somehow I ran out of electrolyte tablets. Pre-race I was sure I had enough; however, some were spread out in my drop bags, one of which I would not see until the next morning. So I switched and started to use Saltstick tablets and chews, which is what the race was providing at the aid stations. In all of my

previous long runs and in my 100K, I was consistent, like clockwork, about both my nutrition, hydration, and electrolyte consumption. On this day; however, I not only wandered off course, I did a horrible job of keeping track of my hydration and nutritional needs.

I started having GI distress, something I very rarely ever experience. As a matter of fact, not once this year did I have this issue. As a result, I also started messing with my nutrition strategy (which originally was comprised of Fig Newton's, Medjool dates, and boiled salted potatoes). I tried a few different things at several of the aid stations, including flour tortillas filled with nutella and banana, cliff gu's, and cliff bars (of which I must have eaten 8. I am not in any hurry to have another anytime soon).

Coming in to the Boston Mills aid station, which was the halfway point of the race, the trail became very familiar. I had run this 8 mile section twice, once last November on my own and once in January during the Buckeye Trail 50K. I totally underestimated this course and honestly did not give it the respect it really deserved. The posted elevation gain is 6135'; however, I have found other reports that state it is closer to 9000'. All I know is that the Afton course I run for training has 2600' of gain for one 25K loop. There are two significant climbs on that Afton loop, one is a long, maybe 10% grade, gravel road on the north end of the park, and the other is a hill referred to as the 'meat grinder' on the south end. The stairs and climbs on the BR100 course were at least as severe and were numerous.





This set of stairs was about 1-½ miles from the 50 mile midpoint of the course.



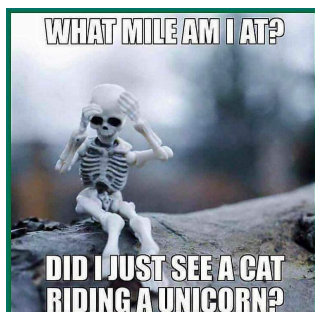
I had two very significant cramps, both of which would have brought me to my knees if I would have been able to actually move at all. Both were in my left leg on the inside of the quad starting just above the knee and traveling almost all the way to the groin. The first incident was on an incline, and the second and most painful occurred on a descent. I also had two significant falls, one crossing a street when I tripped on the curb and face planted into the pavement in front of traffic. The second was just after dark. I was running with Nira and Rachel, and I joked about not falling. 10 seconds later I was picking myself up and scraping off the dirt. Running in the dark, in the woods, was a completely new experience for me. I do not do well with roots in the daylight, and in the dark was an accident waiting to happen.



I came into the Boston Mills aid station 35 minutes ahead of the cut-off time; however, I was losing close to a minute per mile over the previous 10, and after changing my shoes, losing nearly half the contents of my over-packed pack, I was off. I grabbed some grapes and another nutella tortilla sandwich, and I stuffed 4 cliff bars into my pack and was off. I missed a turn at mile 51.5. Here is a photo of that particular turn, no idea how I missed that?

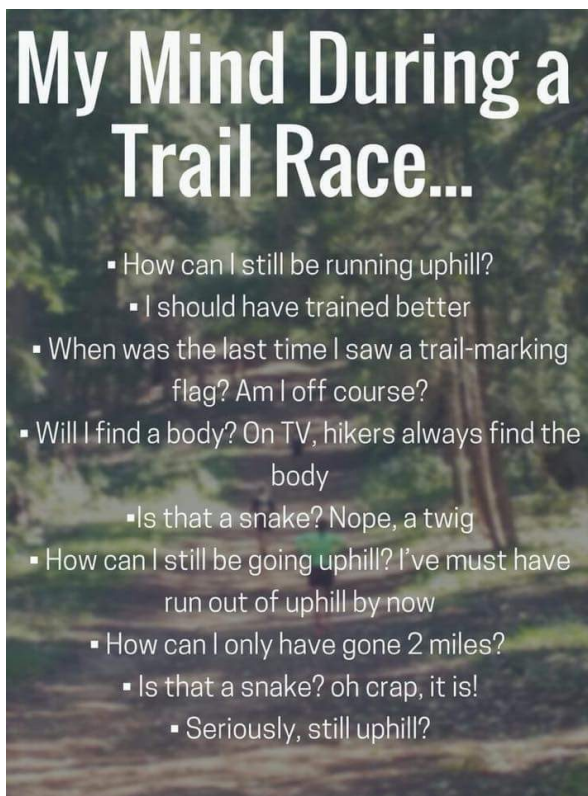
My GI issues continued; I felt nauseous, was light-headed, and was getting confused on the frequency and amount of my hydration and salt tab consumption.

I ran into Nira and Rachel (and their pacers) and started to actually run with them. One of their pacers peeled off at mile 53, and the ladies officially welcomed me into their group as we introduced ourselves. Rachel had some pepto tablets, I took two, and I thought that I might actually start to feel better. We were running the flats and descents and hiking the inclines. When we pulled into the Pine Ln aid station we were about 20 minutes ahead of the cutoff. I'm sorry, but this aid station was in shambles. They did not have water out; we had to ask, and we refilled our own bottles. I asked about cut-offs and was told that we had less than an hour to get to the ledges at mile 66, which was about 6 miles away. My best pace all day was maybe a 12:00min/mile, and that was an eternity ago. We were barely keeping an 18:00 min/mile pace.



We left the aid station, and I needed to use the bathroom; however, I was unwilling to wait. The aid station guy said the next 4 miles were flat, but he didn't say we had to climb a mile to get to the flat. I really started feeling bad again, and I opted to drop back from my new running mates. I wished them well as I slowly drifted back. When I got to the flat I really started feeling weird. I stopped to relieve

myself, and I swear I started seeing things and was actually really starting to get confused and a little scared.



Seriously though, I felt short of breath, and I started to think that something was really wrong. I was on the verge of a full-blown panic attack, and the last thing I wanted was to be the body that one of the other runners would find.

Looking at the RaceJoy app, it appeared that if I just kept going straight at the mile 63 turn, I would end up on route 303, near route 8, and it looked like there might be a BP gas station there according to Miss Google. I called Charlene, not to panic her, but to help me think through my best course of action. I knew that my electrolytes were a mess; however, I did not know which way. Too much? Not enough? Continuing and making the wrong decision could actually be dangerous at this point. It was a couple or three miles before I got to the gas station which was closed. It was after midnight, I had been up for 24-hours, and on this course for 20 of it.

I looked up Uber, created an account, called Charlene for some credit card info, and ordered myself a ride back to my car. I knew approximately where I was and knew that it was only maybe three exits south on route 8 back to the Sheraton and my car. The Uber ride was there in less than 8 minutes once it was ordered. I tried to explain to the driver why I was out there and why I was trying to run 100 miles. He did not really understand but was super sweet and kept asking what he could do to make my ride more comfortable. He dropped me off right at my car, I thanked him and said goodbye.

I was still feeling off and hoped that changing into dry clothes and getting some food and water and possibly a few hours of sleep would help both my physical and mental health start to improve.

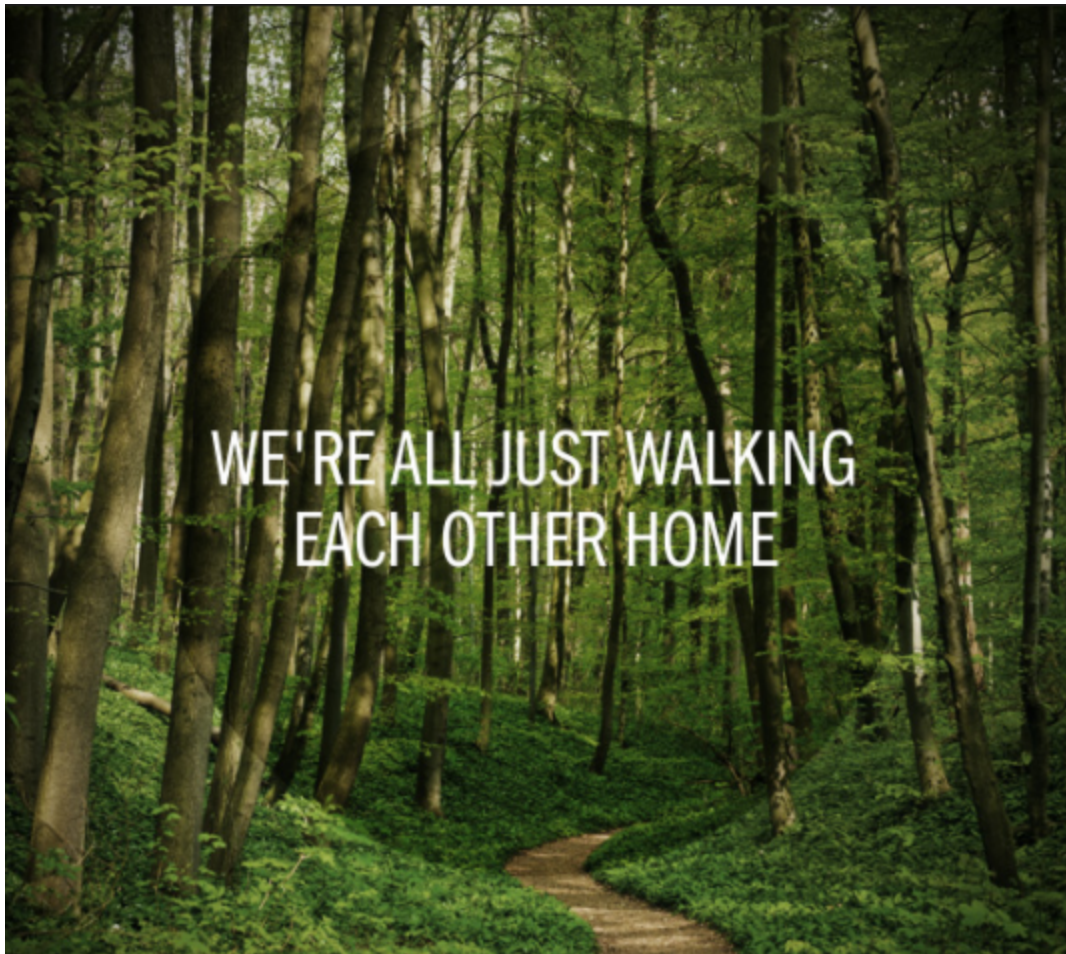
I tried calling several numbers on the athlete information guide to inform someone of my drop status. After several failed attempts I decided to send an email. I was surprised when I got a fairly quick response with a thank you and condolences and an offer to switch me to the 50 mile event for an official time and a finishers medal. I was grateful and accepted her offer to change my category for the event.



## Final Thoughts

Several days removed from the finish of the BR100, I have had some time to reflect on this journey. I know obviously that there is some level of disappointment for not finishing; however, I am filled with gratitude for each and every step along the way. I learned a lot about myself over the past 11 months, I made new connections with so many new and incredible people, and many existing ones were renewed and energized. In addition, we were able to raise \$654 dollars for the Giving Circle (Wilson Tool's employee- run charity). But more importantly, I was able to witness the strength, the courage, and the determination of the human spirit time and time again.

We each are but a single thread, fragile and easily broken; together and entwined, we become stronger, and when we all come together and connect we become unbreakable. - Patricia Burd



- Ram Dass

Some photos of the day:











**Cleveland  
Metroparks**

**BRECKSVILLE  
RESERVATION**





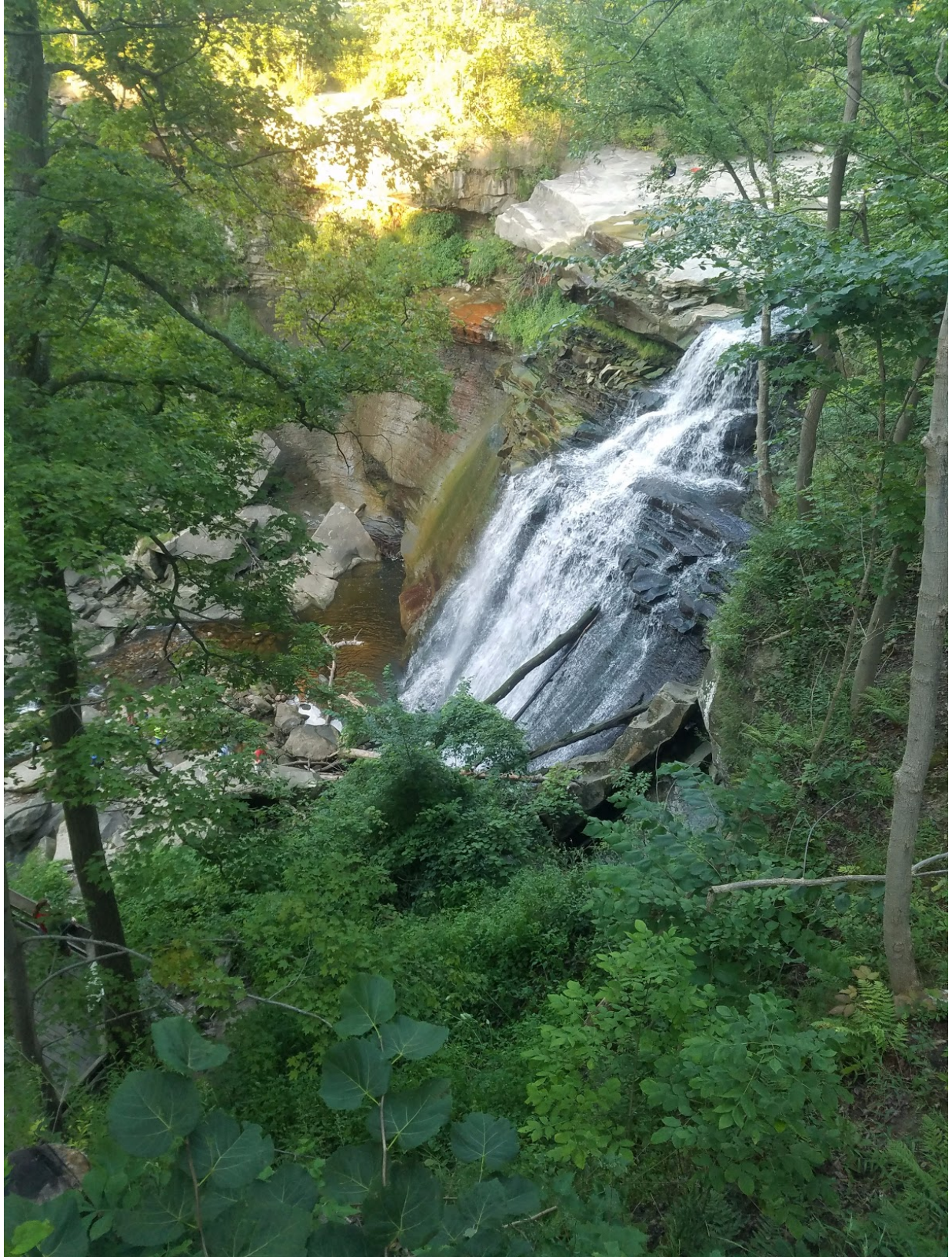






















# *Burning River*



# *BGR Cleve Aid Station*

This was my favorite aid station! They picked up my spirits, cooled me off, and got me back onto the trail!



