



Tribune photograph by DAVE GEIGER

Gregory Graham, 24, prepared for his Appalachian Trail hike by packing boxes with food

and other necessities that will be sent to him along the way.

Mush! USF senior takes off on solo 1,800-mile trail trek

By MIKE MAHAN
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BRANDON — A supermarket checker recently told Gregory Graham, "You must really love your oatmeal," as he passed through the checkout line with \$90 worth of the stuff.

Graham is not really that enamored of the mush, but he will be eating a lot of it during his 1,800-mile, 3½-month solo trek along the Appalachian Trail.

The 24-year-old University of South Florida senior left Tuesday for Georgia's Springer Mountain on the first leg of his journey, which will take him from Springer Mountain to Great Smoky Mountains National Park in North Carolina.

Graham has previously traveled the trail from the Great Smoky Mountains to Damascus, Va., a distance of about 300 miles. He will rendezvous in Damascus with his parents and drive with them to Cleveland, where there will be a family reunion and a 50th wedding anniversary celebration for his folks.

He will then take a bus to Katahdin, Maine, where he will begin his journey back down the East Coast to Damascus. Upon his return to Damascus he will be able to say that he has walked every step of the 2,100-mile trail.

"This is just something that I want to do," said Graham, who will

soon graduate with a double major in communications and psychology. "I'll be traveling alone, so I can go as slow as I want. I plan to take my time and think about what I'm going to do with the rest of my life. It will be a good experience."

The sturdy-looking Graham is going well-equipped. His 50-pound backpack will contain a lot of food, camping stove and fuel, water purifier unit, change of clothes, tennis shoes (which Graham will alternate with hiking boots), bivy pack, sleeping bag and pad, first aid kit, flashlight, camera, 10 rolls of film, utility knife, rope and rain gear.

He has been lifting weights for the past two months to increase his strength and endurance, and he has been running 3½ miles a day for a month. He also consulted a USF nutritionist who made recommendations as to what type of food he should bring along considering the limitations of bulk and weight on his backpack.

Graham said he is ready.

"I'm doing this to help gain a sense of personal accomplishment," said Graham. "I want to be able to say, 'Yeah, I did it,' and feel the fortitude and self-reliance that was involved in the accomplishment."

Like most college students, he probably wouldn't be able to make it without Mom and Dad who will be mailing packages containing food and clean clothes to various

stops along their son's route. They also will be on the receiving end of some of his dirty laundry which he intends to mail to them.

"At least he'll be eating good," said Graham's mother, Emily. She then held up a plastic bag containing freeze-dried shrimp, noodles and rice which, when combined with hot water, would make a filling and nutritious meal she said, attempting to assure herself.

When Graham was describing a river crossing in Maine, where he said two people have died in recent years, his mother chimed in with, "I heard that Gregory. Now I have something else to worry about. Please don't tell us when you cross that river."

She said the words with a smile on her face and humor in her eyes, but along with the humor some concern was evident.

"I don't really understand why he wants to do this," she said. "But he says he has to, so what can I say? He'll make it. But he told us that this was the last time he would be able to do something like this before he settles down to work. I don't know why he couldn't just be a normal carpenter or plumber or something."

With that, the young traveler turned to his mother and said, "Mom, remember that trail I told you about that runs from all the way from Mexico to Canada . . ."