

BLAZING TRAILS *of Faith*

By Melissa Merrill
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*Members of the
Nashua New
Hampshire Stake
could earn this
award—with or
without pulling a
handcart.*



Brigham Young was in Peterborough, New Hampshire, when he received news that the Prophet Joseph Smith had been killed. He immediately left New England and returned to Nauvoo. Within two years, he would start leading groups of Mormon pioneers to the West.

Not far from Peterborough—in an area that today is in the Nashua New Hampshire Stake—Latter-day Saint youth had their own pioneer trek in 2009. But the journey began long before anyone started pulling a handcart.

Earning the Trail of Faith Award

To gain spiritual strength, many of the pioneers sought temple blessings before leaving Nauvoo. Like those early Saints, members of the Nashua stake took the opportunity to participate in temple work and other activities that would strengthen them. They focused on preparing for two journeys:

the 17-mile handcart trek they were about to make and the spiritual journey they would undertake.

They did this through the “Trail of Faith Award,” which stake leaders invited all members of the stake—not just the youth—to participate in. Many of the goals of the program, which began in January, overlapped with requirements from Duty to God, Personal Progress, and the *Brand New Year* fireside. Other challenges were specific to the stake. *All* of them helped participants draw closer to Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ.

“Trail of Faith helped me realize that we weren’t just going on a 17-mile hike or having another youth conference,” says Alexander Petrie, 16. “This was something a little bit different.”

One of the things that made it different for Alexander was memorizing several hymns, including “Press Forward, Saints” (*Hymns*, no. 81). “Later, when I was on trek and it was getting a little bit tough, the words of that hymn kept going over and over in my mind,” he says. “I really felt strength from its words. I’ve realized that hymns are a good thing to memorize and to have in our mind anytime we encounter something difficult. I’m so grateful that the Trail of Faith Award helped me prepare.”

Alden Durham, 12, was not yet old enough to participate in the trek, but, along with his family, he completed the Trail of Faith Award. Two of his most memorable goals involved daily scripture study and journal writing. “When I do these things, I feel the Spirit more, and I definitely act different when I feel the Spirit. I try to be a better brother to my four sisters.”

Alexander Jeffrey, also 12, said his favorite goal was performing baptisms for the dead at the Boston Temple, something he had done only once before. “Doing the Trail of Faith gave me a new understanding and got me better prepared for doing some of these goals and habits on my own,” he says.

Participating in temple work was meaningful for Julia Parker, 16, as well. “It was really neat to take names of people who were related to us—our own ancestors,” she recalls. “When I went to the temple, I thought about them as individual people with individual lives and individual interests. I thought about their testimonies and their experiences and their trials. It was really cool to feel connected with them.”



PHOTOGRAPHY BY COLLEEN SUIWVAN JEFFREY, ELIZABETH JEFFREY, AND PETER JEFFREY



Upon completing the Trail of Faith Award requirements, stake members were given a small medallion so they could remember things they had experienced and felt. “I came out with a medallion at the end,” says Emily Durham, 17, “but I also came out with a stronger testimony.”

Moving Down the Trail

After months of preparation through the Trail of Faith Award, firesides, and other stake-wide activities, the group was ready to embark on its three-day, two-night, 17-mile journey.

The area they live in is rich in American history, so in many ways, the trek experience wasn’t much different from things that youth in the Nashua Stake participate in regularly at school. After all, Emily points out, “Those of us who grew up here have gone on walks at Walden Pond and taken field trips to Sleepy Hollow Cemetery,” she says. But remembering pioneer heritage at youth conference was somehow different.

Elizabeth Jeffrey, 15, agrees. “You dress up, pull handcarts, and have a fun, spiritual experience with your friends,” she says. “I expected that. What I *didn’t* realize was how hard it would be—the actual, physical pulling over hills and rocks and things.

“We were only walking 17 miles; the pioneers walked over a thousand miles to Utah,” she continues. “I think about them differently now. Instead of a Sunday School story on a page, I believe I can now feel a little bit of their struggles and their pains and their great joy. It all became more real when I went on trek.”

Sharing the Experience

As the youth and their leaders completed the trek, other stake members gathered at a local park for a “Welcome to the Valley” celebration. McKenna Gustafson, 14, remembers



feeling “so happy” when she was greeted by the cheering of more than 900 people.

“I saw my younger brothers and sisters running toward us, and I started crying,” she remembers. “I thought about what it will be like in heaven when we see our family and friends who have gone before us and what an awesome reunion that will be.”



As exciting as “Welcome to the Valley” was, it wasn’t the end of the trek experience—not really. In many ways, the trek started friendships with neighbors and community members who had watched the youth over the last 72 hours or heard about the trek through local news coverage.

Anna Parker had an opportunity to connect with neighbors as she and her peers passed through one community. Anna immediately noticed that some of the women there were on horseback, so she told them how much she loved horses. She also explained to them what the youth group was doing and then invited the women to join the youth that night for country dancing. One of them came and even stayed for a short devotional afterward. She was so impressed by the youth that she asked to learn more.

Other youth shared the gospel by telling their friends how they were spending three days of their summer vacation. Others got to know people in the community who had made the trek possible. Youth and adults became friends with kind community members who agreed to let the 150 youth and adults camp on their private property; one of the couples who did so came to a testimony meeting, shared their own feelings, and invited the youth to return.

Looking Back to Move Ahead

“In planning trek, we wanted the youth of the stake to recognize that they can do hard things,” says President Mark Durham of the stake presidency. “Trail of Faith and trek were both part of that.

“What the pioneers did is just unbelievable, but they took it a little bit at a time, and they had their testimony and their faith as a foundation. We can also move one foot in front of the other foot, just like they did.”

James Parker, 18, says that his experiences last summer have helped him to be more diligent in living the gospel and to have a better attitude about the things he is asked to do as a Church member today.

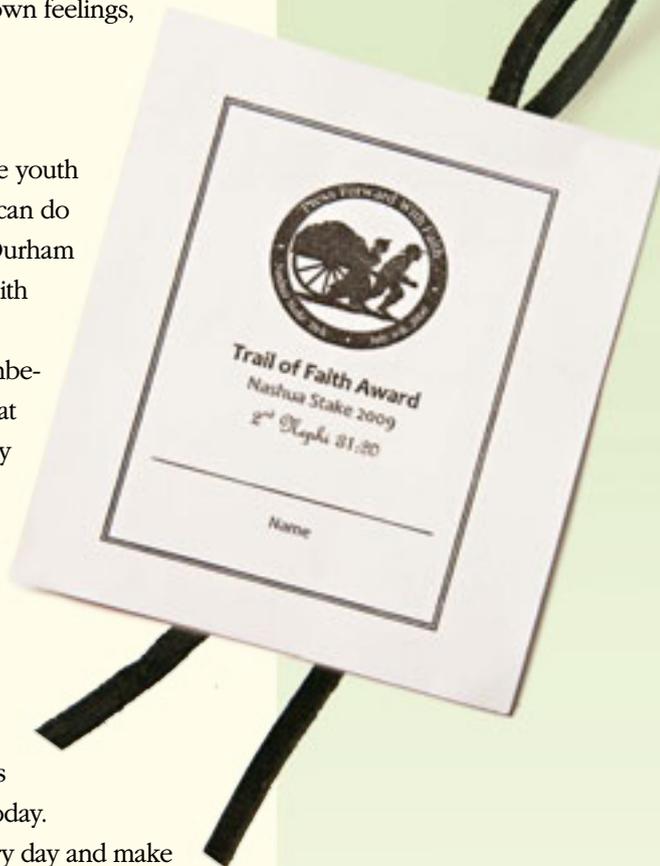
“The pioneers had to get up every day and make a conscious decision to pull their handcarts miles and miles. Trek was a good reminder of the sacrifices they made for the gospel,” he says.

“We’re not asked to do anything as dramatic as that, but I can get up every day and consciously decide to pray and read my scriptures and be reminded of what the gospel is worth to me. Because of trek, I know how much the gospel of Jesus Christ was worth to the pioneers, and their sacrifice makes it more valuable to me.” **NE**



The TRAIL

of Faith AWARD



Sample Requirements from the Nashua New Hampshire Stake’s Trail of Faith Award

- Read scriptures, pray, and smile daily.
- Read five minutes per day from the Book of Mormon.
- Help develop your family mission plan.
- Memorize Moroni 10:3–5 and 2 Nephi 31:20.
- Keep a journal.
- Commit to live more fully three standards from *For the Strength of Youth*.
- Exercise regularly.
- See what information the Church already has about you and your ancestors on FamilySearch.org.
- Read D&C 1, 4, 136, and 138.
- Memorize *Hymns*, nos. 30, 81, and 85.
- Pray and look for missionary experiences.
- Learn the history of a pioneer who crossed the plains.

NEmore

For more Nashua teens’ experiences with Trail of Faith and the trek, visit newera.lds.org.