

Crescent City man conquers the R3

October 22, 2023



The rim-to-rim-to-rim (R3) hike through the Grand Canyon is famous for its majesty and difficulty. While the vistas are stunning – the terrain is dangerous and quickly fatal to the novice outdoor enthusiast. Sadly, an average of 12 lives are claimed by the canyon annually. David Hatton II, of Crescent City, nearly became one of them. In March 2023, David set off on an R3 attempt as an optimistic 18-year-old. He was underprepared for the extreme late-winter weather and found himself wet, stranded, and alone.

Whether by divine intervention or immense luck – fate brought David together with a group of elite thrill-seekers on an R3 expedition that night. A group of adventurers led by the founders of Man Made – an organization aimed at helping men find purpose through challenging experiences – were arriving at the Manzanita mid-way rest point just as David was giving up hope. The group leaders comprised former Colorado Rockies pitcher Josh Kalinowski, retired US Army Lieutenant Colonel Jimmy Kleager, and retired US Navy SEAL and sniper school instructor William Branum. They banded together to lead David safely out of the canyon. This was the start of a meaningful connection for the men that continues to this day.

This newly minted band of brothers stayed in touch, discussing everything from life goals to being a man in 2023. As the group shared their ambitions, one topic continued to nag at each of them – they had unfinished business with the R3. It was decided that Man Made would reunite with Hatton to conquer the canyon in a new expedition leaving Sedona, Ariz., on October 2. They were ready after months of communication, physical training, gear curation and testing. The men converged on Flagstaff, Ariz., to stage their R3 hike: Operation Unfinished Business. This time would be different.

The Man-Made October expedition included seven men. The Man-Made founders, David Hatton II, two clients and one elite guide. They departed on their R3 attempt at 4 in the afternoon of October 2. This time, the weather conditions were ideal. The temperatures were in the 70s, and the sun was shining. The favorable conditions continued as the sun went down, and the night portion of the hike was upon them. The group would hike overnight.

“The skies were clear, and the stars were breathtaking,” Hatton said when asked about his time in the Canyon. “It was really dark out there. When the sun was down, you couldn’t see a thing ahead except the next steps you were taking by the light of your headlamp. A couple of times, we stopped to take a moment and just fully experience the night sky in this powerful place.”

In the beginning, the group was full of anxious anticipation. After all, this was more than a hike. This R3 attempt was a path to redemption, an opportunity to conquer the rocky trails that had sent them packing last March. Moreover, it was a life-changing rite of passage for David Hatton II.

“David was ready to go! He was so focused... just absorbing any and all wisdom the older guys could pour into him. He was so determined, and with every challenge, he rose to the occasion and showed the grit he’s really made of,” said Jimmy Kleager.

Kleager described how each of the Man-Made founders made it a point to spend some quality one-on-one time talking and walking with David. They started from the South Rim, and the group descended the South Kaibab Trail toward Phantom Ranch.

“We talked at length about rejecting toxic passivity and what it means to be a compassionate and competent leader,” Kleager said.

One of the challenges of the terrain in an R3 attempt is that the Canyon’s elevation changes take hikers through a spectrum of temperatures. Conditions on the North Rim were bitter cold.

“It was freezing at the top of the north rim. You can see your breath. We were all hurrying toward warmth,” said Hatton.

In contrast, about 1,000 feet lower in elevation, the South Rim is breezy but not cold. Everyone felt most comfortable when they reached the relative warmth of the Canyon’s floor. All in all, when interviewed, it was clear that the experience was deeply meaningful to each man.

When asked what the Grand Canyon was like, Kleager emphasized the proportions of it all, and how it makes one reflect on their place in the universe.

“It’s big. Bigger than you ever dreamed. You’re at the bottom looking up in just a couple of hours. You feel so small as you walk through the canyon floor, looking up at the towering granite sides. All you can do is just take it all in and reflect on life and where you’re headed next,” he said.

All seven men in the Man Made R3 group made it successfully to the end. While many in David Hatton II’s life share in his happiness at having completed this rite of passage – those who know him well are not surprised.

“He is someone who always follows through on things,” said Tony Fabricious, principal of Sunset High School in Crescent City. “Hearing about David struggle the first time out and then coming back around and attempting the R3 again and finishing it... I knew that was David.”

Sunset High School, Hatton’s alma mater, has an excellent reputation as an alternative high school that serves its students with an emphasis on fostering leadership and accountability.

In this way, it’s almost poetic that David, when he needed help most in March 2023, was found by a group of men who had dedicated their lives to leadership and commitment to serving others. After his successful R3 hike, he can pass his knowledge and experience on to others. Principal Fabricious sounded proud as he reflected on this fact.

“David is a quality person. He was always dependable. He always answered the call. He is an example of what a Sunset student is.”

The 24-hour round-trip hike was full of highs. One of Kleager’s favorite moments was when David took the lead and brought the group back to Phantom Ranch.

Jimmy said smiling, “William (Branum) had taught him a paced shuffle that was easier on the legs, and he put it to full use. Yes, David Hatton II, a 19-year-old, was leading an Army Ranger, a Major League Baseball pitcher, and a Navy Seal.”

When asked for his thoughts on Hatton, post-R3, it’s evident that Kleager holds him in high esteem.

“David is a man among boys. What he accomplished at the age of 19 will last him a lifetime. It truly sets him above his peers. After the R3, I am confident David can accomplish anything in life he sets his mind to.”

The feeling is mutual. David had this to say about the experience.

“It’s something I needed, that is for sure. It was a great honor. I got to learn who these people are; they are outstanding men I admire deeply. It has been a life-changing experience.”

More on Man Made

The men behind Man Made, a life coaching firm that seeks to help men find their purpose, have been tackling the impossible for years. Each brings their unique strengths and experience— uniting to conquer the punishing terrain of the trail... and life. Founded by athletes and armed forces veterans, Man Made makes elite climbs accessible to its clientele. Learn more about Man Made's mission and founders at www.manmadetribe.com.