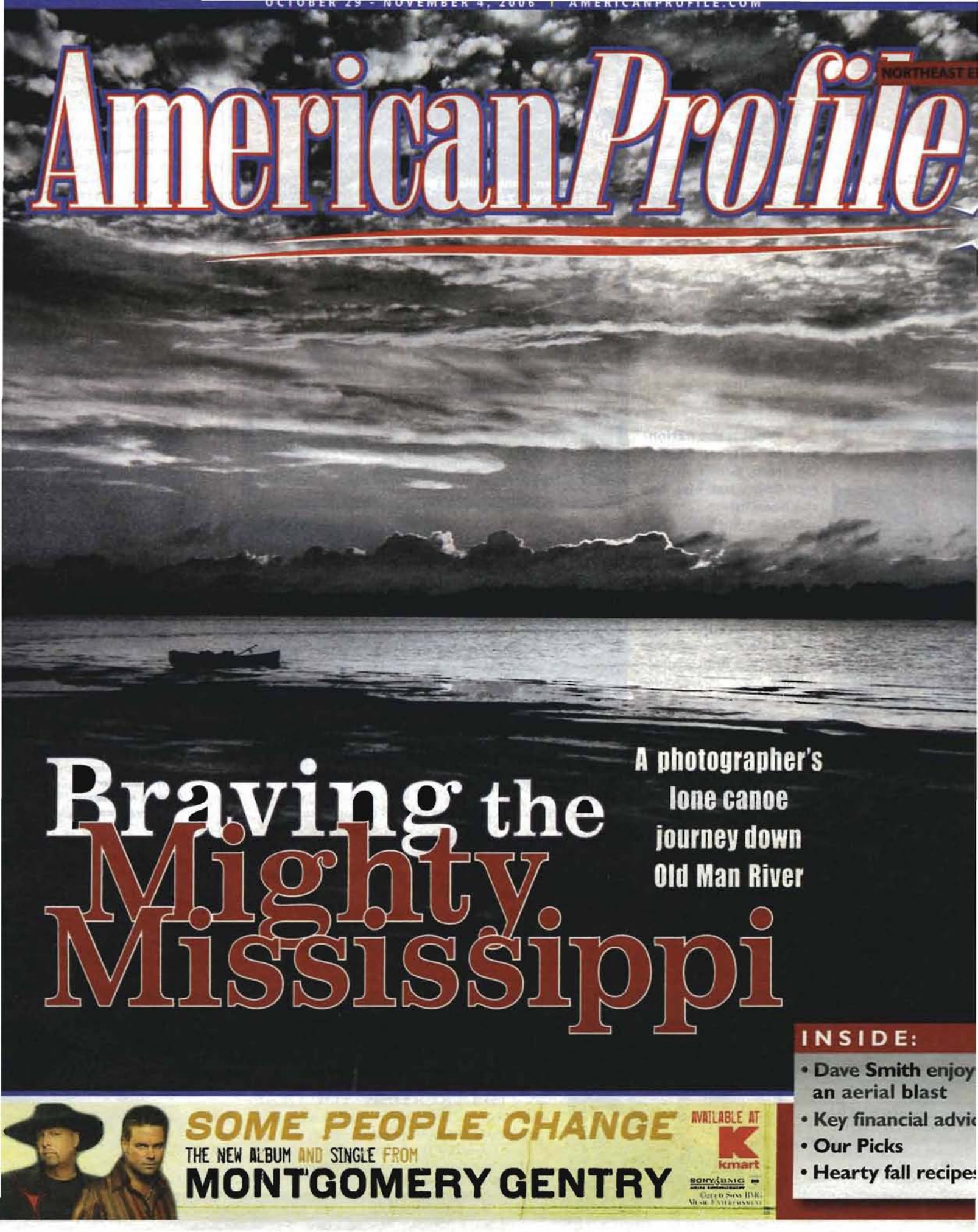


American Profile



Braving the Mighty Mississippi

A photographer's
lone canoe
journey down
Old Man River

INSIDE:

- Dave Smith enjoys an aerial blast
- Key financial advice
- Our Picks
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Braving the Mighty Mississippi

by ALAN ROSS
Photos by John Guider

A photographer's
lone canoe
journey down
Old Man River



Like so many incurable romantics, John Guider has always been a dreamer. But in early 2002, he dreamed of a grand adventure that he couldn't get out of his head.

"I decided that one day I would leave my Williamson County (Tenn.) farmhouse, walk to the creek on the edge of my property, board a canoe, and paddle as long as it took to reach the high river banks of New Orleans," says Guider, 57.

The dream was fueled by a serious case of job burnout, brought on after a 30-year career as one of the South's most successful commercial photographers. "I had reached a crossroads," says Guider, who grew weary of the monotonous procession of shooting products on tabletops and lifeless models in glitzy fashion wear. "I felt the need to change myself."



John Guider's canoe rests near his farmhouse.

Inspired by Peter Jenkins' landmark 1979 best seller, *A Walk Across America*, Guider's dream began to crystallize before him: photographing people, landscapes and life all along the great Mississippi River while canoeing its mighty waters in search of adventure.

"I liked the idea of exploring nature and humanity simultaneously," he says. "I wanted to do something that honored people who are generally forgotten; to give homage to average hardworking people. I wanted to find the *real* Americans."

With that resolve, on Aug. 9, 2003, Guider cast off in a 16-foot red canoe full of supplies and camera equipment at Spencer Creek behind his home in Franklin, Tenn. (pop. 53,311). It would be the first and longest leg of his mission: to canoe the entire length of the Mississippi River, photographing its people and places along the way. The initial trek, from Franklin to New Orleans, would take three months and see him traverse five rivers—the Harpeth, Cumberland, Tennessee, Ohio and Mississippi—totaling 1,200 miles.

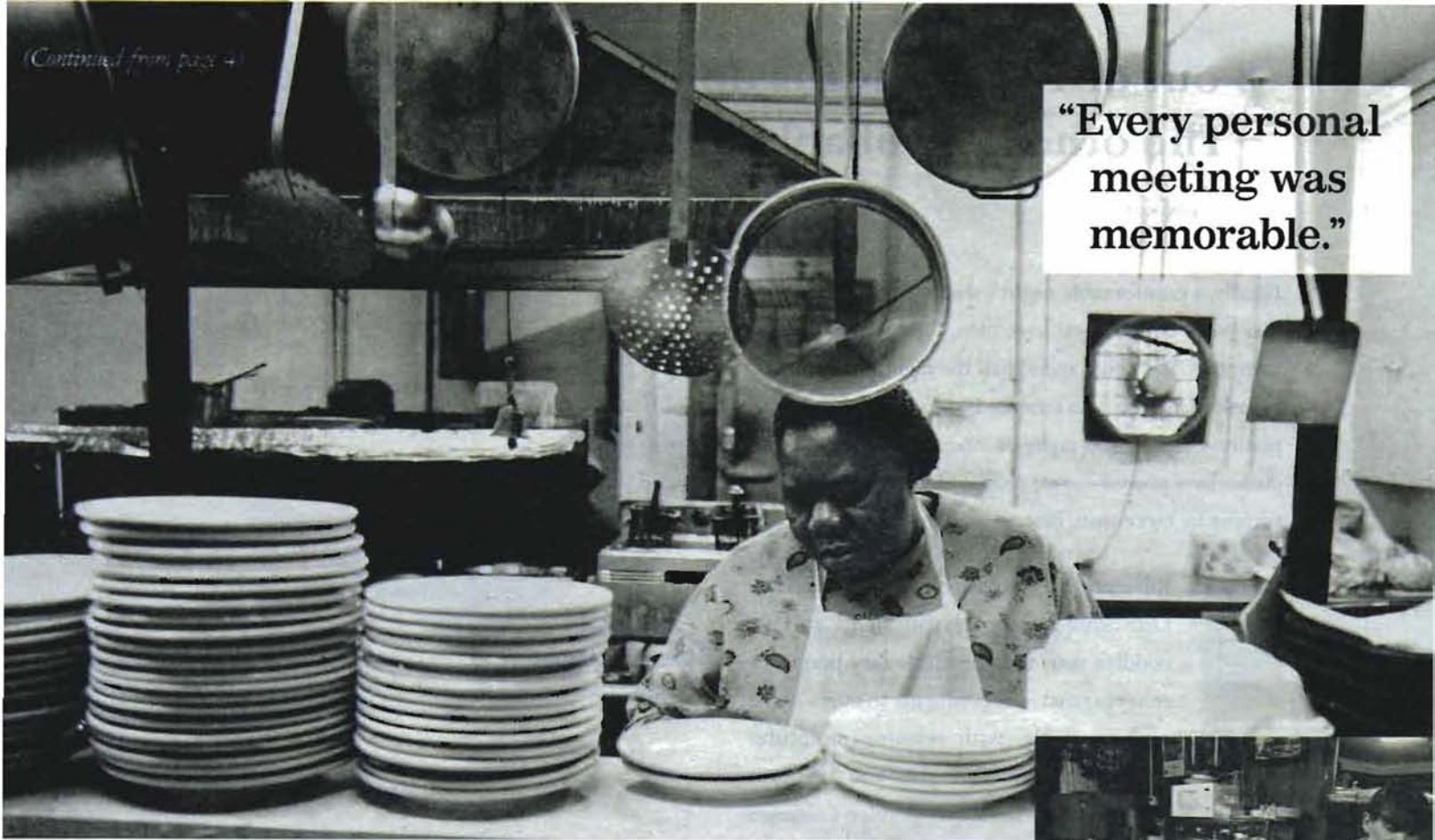


"I don't know if it's so much what I learned about myself, but what I affirmed within myself."

—John Guider

(Continued on page 4)

“Every personal meeting was memorable.”



A perilous journey

It wasn't long before Guider's imagined journey met with reality. "The plan and the dream were purely romantic notions," says Guider, who had little previous canoeing or camping experience. "Reality has a way of being a little more ugly than a dream."

Some of his journey's perils included overcoming 4-foot-high wakes from ocean-going freighters, negotiating around 200-foot-long river barges, and the time a docked barge accidentally discharged a spray of sewage into his parked canoe, destroying \$5,000 worth of cameras and film stock.

And then there were the deadly whirlpools lurking along the riverbanks. "They are like monsters, roaming the river like inverted tornados," says Guider of the swirling 30-foot-wide menaces. "They don't seem to have a path. You try to avoid one only to have another come at you. If a whirlpool gets you, it could suck you down 90 feet and you might never come back up."

"Every day on the Mississippi, I would ask myself if I wanted to live or die," says Guider, who also had run-ins with a bear, coyotes and pair of deadly cottonmouth snakes. "There was no gray area, you did what you had to do. It was basically being a caveman, and at the end of the day, I was just so exhausted that I could barely set up the tent."

He undertook no specific training regimen for

the ordeal either, electing to paddle his way into shape, losing 30 pounds over the course of the first leg. It was a blessing in disguise that Guider began his adventure on a small creek before graduating to the larger rivers.

"Each river had its own experience and its own challenge, which prepared me for the next," Guider says. "Had I gotten on the Mississippi at the start, I would've died."

Meeting real Americans

But the journey also provided wonderful surprises, like the people he met and photographed, such as George Rye, an elderly fisherman from Cumberland City, Tenn., who regaled Guider with yarns of old trips to Alaska and the joys of early morning fishing on the Cumberland River. Rye was the proud owner of a 30-year-old pickup truck that evoked questions from friends as to how long it would be before he'd sell it. Rye joked that he planned to die in it, thereby saving on the cost of a casket.

"His conversation lifted my spirits," says Guider, who adds that no matter where he went, people along the river were full of generosity.

"People looked out for me wherever I went," he says. "From the guys on the harbor tugs who offered me food and showers, to the people in the towns and riverside campsites who would drive me to the market to replenish my supplies. Every per-

(Continued on page 8)



Locals at Jim's Place Restaurant in Greenville, N.C.

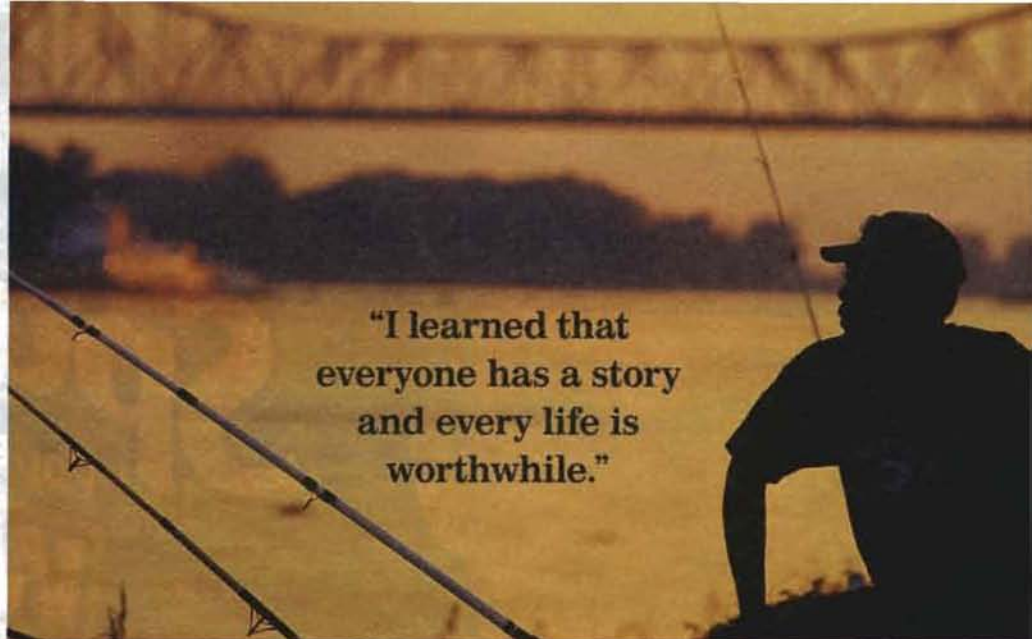


Encountering river wildlife



A harbor worker at Louisiana's Madison Parish P...

(Continued from page 6)



"I learned that everyone has a story and every life is worthwhile."

Guider's camera captures a fisherman at the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers in Cairo, Ill.

sonal meeting was memorable. I learned that everyone has a story and every life is worthwhile."

Along the way, Guider captured mesmerizing photographs of people and landscapes, more than 10,000 shots in all, which he plans to exhibit in museums in 2008.

A hero's welcome . . . sort of

Of course, no journey of such magnitude ever had a more slapstick ending than Guider's victorious arrival into downtown New Orleans. Reaching his take-out point, he joyously reunited with his wife, Mona, there to greet him at journey's end. Suddenly, four squad cars, a police helicopter, the Coast Guard and the harbor patrol descended upon the pair, after a protective citizen spotted Guider from a bridge overpass and phoned police, convinced the city was under terrorist attack. Fortunately, a quick explanation by the mild-mannered Guider soon diffused the situation.



A young angler's catch

Guider took to his canoe again in August 2005, this time journeying the Mississippi from its point of origin, near Lake Itasca in northern Minnesota, to Minneapolis—a jaunt of 550 river miles. The month-long passage was highlighted by a near-death experience, in which Guider capsized in marsh water near Bemidji, spending the night in 38-degree temperatures and paddling through the night to ward off hypothermia.

But even under those harrowing circumstances, Guider found splendor in the experience. "It was the most beautiful evening I've ever seen in my life," he recalls. "Meteorites were going this way and that; I saw constellations I've never seen before. I was

just enthralled. I thanked God that, if this was the night I was going to go, He couldn't have provided a better exit."

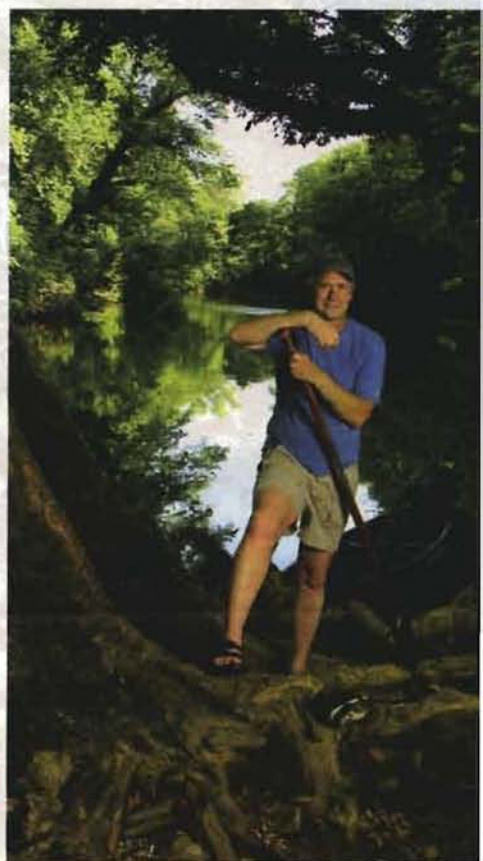
This past August, Guider attempted canoeing the final leg, from Minneapolis to Cairo, Ill., to complete his 2,800-river-mile excursion. A misadventure, however, near Bellevue, Ill., in which his canoe capsized outside a river lock, sinking his camera equipment, caused him to abort. Undaunted, he will try again in the spring. Nonetheless, the many and varied lessons gained from his eventful voyage have registered an indelible impact upon him.

"I don't know if it's so much what I learned about myself, but what I affirmed *within* myself," he says of his experience.

"One thing is that it's really going to be hard for me to ever be afraid again." ☆

Alan Ross is a freelance writer in Columbia, Tenn.

Visit www.johnguider.com to learn more.



John Guider's journey began near his Franklin, Tenn.



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