



Photo courtesy of OSAT.

OSAT members celebrate and encourage sobriety through outdoor trips such as this hike near Mount Baker.

Sobriety, One Step At a Time

Outdoor 12-step recovery club has been helping people with addiction for 16 years

For 16 years, recovering alcoholics and their friends in OSAT have walked each day One Step At a Time.

“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference. Keep climbing mountains and don’t slip,” recited members at a recent OSAT meeting in Mercer Island.

While the intonation is similar to the serenity prayer, this is not an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. Any member of the Mercer Island-based nonprofit is quick to address the difference.

OSAT is a nonprofit organization dedicated to recovery-oriented outdoor events.

The group’s mission states they support recovery in the spirit of conservation, preservation and ecology. Formed in 1991 by Jim Hinkhouse, OSAT is now an organized group of over 200 members. Sixteen years ago, Hinkhouse started taking his AA groups on hikes to Tiger Mountain every week as a physical representation of taking sobriety one day, and one step at a time.

“There’s a much tighter bond to people [than in AA],” said Chris N., chairman of the Board

of Trusted Servants (BOTS)— whose last name was withheld, as is common in AA. “When you’re climbing with someone, you trust your life to them.”

They’re not exclusive though. Many of the members of OSAT became involved by meeting someone at an AA meeting who belonged to both OSAT and AA. They’ve also recently discussed opening the group to non-recovery people interested in the outdoors. Neither being a member of AA nor being in recovery are requisites of membership.

Atop Tiger Mountain recovering alcoholics and their friends gather to encourage sobriety.

Dave F. heard about OSAT at an AA meeting and went hiking on Tiger Mountain wearing a T-shirt and jeans. “But I’m a glutton for punishment, so I went back,” said Dave F.

BOTS are elected by members to serve two-year terms. They manage the organization’s administrative duties. Chris N., now in his second term, joined OSAT 12 years ago

after meeting a woman at an AA meeting who showed him pictures from an OSAT hike. He also met his wife of nine years at an AA meeting on Tiger Mountain in the Issaquah Alps.

“In recovery, there’s so much more to life than just recovery. In OSAT, I found that.”



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OSAT Info

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Visit the OSAT website for membership information. E-mails are answered within 24 hours.

Dues/fees are \$12 per year for a single member and \$18 for a couple.

An annual release and indemnity agreement are required.

A backpacker prior to joining OSAT, Chris N. summited Mount Rainier his first summer in OSAT, in 1995.

"It was indescribably cool," said Chris N.

Later, he returned the favor by organizing a trip to hike several Mexican volcanoes in 1999.

Service and giving back are common themes in OSAT. Nancy T. feels OSAT is a recovery group that revolves around support. Her first hike on Tiger Mountain, where she met the founder, Jim Hinkhouse, kept Nancy T. returning. Now she's a rope leader and a sherpa on the Rainier expedition. Sherpas are OSAT members who pack other hikers' gear to help lighten the load.

"It's like a tribe," said Nancy T. "You want to see them be successful in recovery, but you also want them to climb the mountain. "There are sherpas on the Rainier expedition as a spirit of support to help others succeed and have a good time."

Another common theme is the experience of a higher power and serenity while outdoors. Nancy T. saw OSAT's combination of recovery, outdoors and spirituality and was drawn to it nine years ago. She grew up in Chicago with few mountains around. When she arrived in the Northwest, she remembered thinking of mountains as scary. On her first hike on Tiger Mountain she met Hinkhouse, and remembers laughter, teasing and compassion. "There had to be a positive release of energy," said Nancy T.

While stacked with fun, adventure and camaraderie, OSAT remains a support group for alcoholics, and that can still be difficult.

"People don't come to AA because they're feeling good,"

said Nancy T. "Usually they come in pain. But it's touching to see people gain confidence and change, usually for the better."

Dave F. added that the pain can become something better.

"Taking people out of their comfort zones makes them more open to new things," said Dave F.

OSAT began much like the stories above. Hinkhouse was a 10-years-sober alcoholic, a member of AA and became involved in mountaineering. Raised in Oregon with a view of Mount Baker and Mount Hood, Hinkhouse moved to Seattle in the 1980s and began mountaineering. He began meeting other mountaineers in recovery and had the idea to have an

AA meeting on Rainier. So he started a group that met weekly to train on Tiger Mountain.

"He wanted to bring mountaineering to recovery," said Rik Anderson, a longtime friend of Hinkhouse.

After starting the group, Anderson says Hinkhouse began to understand the magnitude of his creation.

"That's where Jimmy's [Hinkhouse] struggles started, when he realized it became a weekly thing and the separation between OSAT and AA needed to happen," said Anderson.

By 1995, Hinkhouse retired and created an established nonprofit organization. However, it was also

the year of his unexpected death on an expedition to Alaska's Denali National Park. During the expedition, a storm trapped Hinkhouse and two other OSAT members at Windy Corner on Mount McKinley. They died from hypothermia. Hinkhouse's legacy, however, continues in the existence and growth of OSAT.

OSAT shows no signs of slowing down. The group expanded to include biking, camping, climbing, ice skating, skiing, snowshoeing, and running. The most popular event is OSAT's annual glacier climbing course. Participants condition by climbing Mount Si.

The group also sponsors events such as the Gratitude Dinner, a Christmas party, car camping trips and a ski trip. Now, many members plan side expeditions in Hinkhouse and New-man fashion.

"It's just taken off ever since the club's been around," said Chris N.

Even though OSAT expanded beyond exclusively hiking, it remains at the heart of the organization.

"[Climbing] was a huge attraction for me," said Chris N. "I'm sharing my recovery with [other climbers], which you don't get anywhere else."

From a group of less than 30 people in 1995, OSAT now has more than 200 members.

"Some people just won't go away," joked Dave B. "It's an interesting thing that it's still around."

Another way they remember Hinkhouse is an annual celebration of OSAT's formation. Members hike Tiger Mountain the first Thursday of daylight savings time every year to honor OSAT's birthday. Dave F. and others pack cooking stoves and cookware so he can make a gourmet meal. On previous trips, Dave has cooked halibut, steak and chicken Alfredo.

As a 12-step recovery program, the seriousness of recovery remains. But still, OSAT's enthusiasm, support, compassion and love of the outdoors shines through.

"In sobriety, there's so much more to life than just recovery," said Chris N. "In OSAT, I found that."



Photo courtesy of OSAT

Jim Hinkhouse, pictured above, founded OSAT in 1991. He died on an expedition in Denali National Park in Alaska in 1995, but his vision of a recovery group rooted in the outdoors lives on.