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Take a hike: a documentary following first time hikers

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Take a Hike:

A Documentary Following First-Time Hikers

Katherine Hopper

University Honors Thesis

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Interdisciplinary Thesis

Examination Date: April 3rd, 2024

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Introduction

This project began as a traditional research thesis, however I quickly realized that it would be more impactful as a creative thesis. My goal with this documentary was to create a tangible and easily consumable product that would encourage people to spend time exercising outside. I knew that there weren't many documentaries about day hikes or first-time hikers, so I decided that was the niche that I would work in.

While there might not be a documentary about this topic, there is however a substantial amount of research dedicated to the benefits of spending time in nature. An article published in National Geographic Magazine in 2016 explains how being in close contact with nature lowers a person's chances of disease (Williams, 2016). Not only does nature benefit us physically, but it also benefits us psychologically. A study in the Journal of Psychological Science found that nature provides a peaceful environment that cannot be replicated by being in a peaceful environment indoors (Berman et. Al, 2008). These are only a few of the studies that have found nature to be beneficial for humans. A study published in the Extreme Physiology and Medicine Journal found that "outdoor natural environments may provide some of the best all-round health benefits by increasing physical activity levels with lower levels of perceived exertion, altering physiological functioning including stress reduction, restoring mental fatigue, and improving mood and self-esteem and perceived health" (Gladwell et. al, 2013). There are clear benefits of exercising outside, my goal was to capture them all on camera.

Instead of educating people on the benefits of hiking via research, I wanted to show them with a documentary. Medical professionals and educators can tell people about the benefits of exercise and being outside, however, people are not often motivated simply by education. The documentary that I created tells a story about how real people feel about hiking. This documentary was an opportunity to take the research that has been done about physical activity

and time spent outdoors and create a tangible reason for why it is worth a person's time. The documentary follows five college students who self-identified as new hikers. Each person completed the same hike independently of one another. Multiple fields of study were used to complete the thesis. This thesis was an intersection of exercise science, psychology, film, and communication. Through collaboration with faculty from a variety of disciplines I was able to create this documentary. I hope that people who haven't hiked before will see the documentary and want to try hiking out for themselves.

Documentary Process and Methods

Once I had my vision for the documentary, the first step was selecting a location and familiarizing myself with it. I had hiked the Edward's Point trail in Signal Mountain, Tennessee a few times but never with a documentary in mind. Before filming, I intentionally hiked the trail twice while keeping in mind possible interview locations and questions. After I selected the trail, I created flyers advertising the project. The flyer in Appendix A is the version that I posted on the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga's campus. I used Canva to design and print the flyers, and I created the QR code with assistance from Dr. Peyer. The QR code directed people to a short survey that asked about age, major, and hiking experience. Along with posting the flyers on campus, I also had the flyer run as an announcement in both the Honors College newsletter and the campus-wide newsletter. I advertised the project until I had five first-time hikers committed to hiking.

Before taking each hiker on the trail, I created a list of interview questions that I would ask each of them. A full list of the interview questions can be seen in Appendix B. Along with creating interview questions, I also created a waiver for the hike. The waiver was to ensure that each hiker took personal responsibility for their safety while hiking. The waiver also allowed them to consent to being filmed. The waiver can be seen in Appendix C. On the technical side, I had to educate myself on the different filming options. My first option was a GoPro that I rented from the UTC library. I took the GoPro on a hike to determine if I should use it for my project. I decided that the screen on it was too small and wouldn't allow me to quickly review footage on the trail. My second option was my iPhone 13, and after a few tests, I decided it would work well for filming. To stabilize the iPhone, I used a small handheld tripod which can be seen in Appendix E. With my equipment decided on, I started scheduling hikes.

I had about 20 students respond to my advertisements for the project, but for a variety of

reasons only five of the students followed through with hiking. One interesting side note is that each hiker in the documentary was female, which was not by design. I purposefully scheduled the hikes during October and November with the hope that each hike would be filmed when the leaves were changing color. Unfortunately, schedules did not align to allow for that vision to happen; but as you can see in the documentary we were able to capture the changing of seasons throughout the filming timeline. I'm glad that the timing worked out as it did because it gives the documentary a subtle cohesiveness as the first hike was filmed when the majority of plants were green, and the final hike was filmed when the majority of the plants were grey. As I mentioned in the documentary, I gave each hiker minimal information before our hikes. The information I gave them was that they should bring water and dress comfortably. I also told them about the length and location of the hike. Each hike was very straightforward. We were very lucky and had no issues with the weather. We also had no injuries during the hikes. The biggest issue we encountered was parking since the trailhead is popular and there is not adequate parking. This issue was easily resolved as there is parking along the street that the trailhead is on.

Once filming was completed, I began the process of storing and editing the footage. During the hikes, I stored all the footage on Google Photos. I knew that to edit the footage I would need to extract the footage from the cloud and have it on a hard drive. I had never worked with storing large files before, so I visited the UTC Library Studio for assistance and education. While working with the Studio staff I learned about transferring the files from Google Photos to a hard drive. The hard drive is shown in Appendix E. Along with file storage, the Studio taught me the foundations of video editing. Before this documentary, I had never edited a video longer than two minutes. I had also never used advanced editing software. The Studio recommended that I use Adobe Premier Pro. At the Studio I learned about importing and exporting files with Premier Pro. With all my footage uploaded, I could begin editing it.

Editing was the most challenging aspect of this project. I was not prepared for how overwhelming it would be to sit down with three hours of footage and wade through it to find the best parts. It took me three different tries to organize the footage in a manageable way. The first time I organized the footage was on the timeline and I categorized the clips based on hiker. This method was helpful because I was able to see the duration of footage that I had for each person. At this point in my editing, I knew very little about the software and I accidentally deleted the timeline where I had organized all the clips. That was a good lesson to learn in the beginning because it introduced me to how timelines and sequences work in Premier Pro. After that, I thought that could organize the footage into different sequences based on the individual hikers. This ended up being more confusing because I was constantly re-watching clips to determine what was happening in them and where they should be chronologically. At this point, I knew there had to be an easier way so I watched a few tutorials that were specifically focused on video organization within Premier Pro. From those videos, I learned that I could rename clips based on what was happening in them and then alphabetize the clips in my media library. In Appendix E you can see images of the organized clips. At this point, I finally had a grasp on which clips I wanted to use and how I was going to structure the overall video.

The first draft of this documentary was not pleasant to watch. It was choppy and there wasn't much of a story. I originally wanted each hiker's stories to intersperse with one another to create the feeling of one large hike. However, because each hike was visually very different there was no cohesion in the visuals. When I first started editing my idea was that I would have the students' audio be the bulk of the documentary audio. However, because I didn't have a microphone for the hikers their voices were significantly more muffled than my own. I attempted to edit this, but it wasn't possible to do so because when I raised the volume where the hikers were talking it raised the volume of the ambient sound as well. My first attempt at editing was

not great because I wasn't sure what I wanted the story to be and I had no idea how to navigate the audio issue.

It was at this point that I knew I needed help from a professional. I reached out to Will Davis at the PodLab and asked him for advice. He used his expertise in podcasting to advise me on the best way to proceed with editing. He helped me decide how I wanted the final documentary to be structured. He was also extremely helpful when it came to setting realistic goals for myself. He gave me a multitude of pointers about how to best approach a project that felt overwhelming. After speaking with Professor Davis I was able to start making significant progress with editing. With the help of more tutorials, I slowly learned all the different tools that Premier Pro boasts. I was able to cut clips, change the speed of clips, insert transitions, add text, edit audio levels, and even rotate clips. Once I understood the basic functions of Premier Pro I was able to create a story that made sense. With the visual portion coming together, I needed to start thinking about how I was going to tell the story of each hiker. Professor Davis had suggested using a voiceover to make up for the shortcomings in the audio I originally captured. To have a voiceover, I needed a script.

Instead of writing a script and then making the visual portion fit the script, I alternated between visual and audio. This allowed me to control the structure of the documentary. In Appendix D I have included the final script from the documentary. For some of the voiceover, I had a general idea of what I wanted to convey and then improvised the specific wording of it when I recorded it. In Appendix E you can see the microphone that I used to record the voiceover audio. With the audio recorded, I began to fine-tune the documentary. I had to adjust the volume and timing of certain sections to ensure that the story flowed as smoothly as possible. In reality, I could keep tweaking and editing this project for a long time however I feel confident and proud of the final version.

Reflection

The main reason that I chose this form of thesis was to challenge myself. I knew that I could write a traditional thesis paper because I have experience with extended papers. However, I was less confident in my ability to complete a creative thesis because I had never started and finished a large creative endeavor. I don't often prioritize creativity in my personal life, but I felt that if I made it an academic goal I would be more likely to devote time to it. As I predicted, I did devote time to this project. Some aspects of it took longer than I anticipated which was discouraging at times, but it also gave me a new perspective on what it means to persevere. As I had hoped, creating this thesis challenged me to develop new skills and connect with new people. Not only did this project challenge me, but it also helped me grow on a personal level.

I started college at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic which meant that I did not have a typical transition to adulthood. Due to the pandemic, my first year of college was miserable. I met a few people, but I only made one friend. I did well academically in my first year but my confidence plummeted because I wasn't sure what career path I wanted to pursue and I felt that my lack of friends was due to personal flaws. Since I started college out on rocky footing, it took me a few years to gain back my confidence. Hiking is one of the ways that I grew my confidence. I took a hiking seminar through the Honors College in the fall semester of 2022. The first day of class I thought about dropping it because I didn't feel like I fit in. I thought that everyone in the class had a certain "coolness" that I was missing. I also felt that I wouldn't be able to physically keep up with the others because they seemed to all be in good physical shape. I decided to remain in the class, which was the best decision. While in this class I learned that I could do things that seemed hard and out of my wheelhouse. I came to love the challenges that hiking offered, such as climbing up a mountain or navigating rocky terrain. The confidence and comfort that I found in hiking is one of the reasons I chose to make a documentary specifically

about new hikers.

The participants of the documentary were not all women by design, however I'm glad that they were. Outdoor adventuring is dominated by men which is why I was excited to hear women's perspectives on hiking. I felt that by leading these five women on hikes I was able to help each of them find the same confidence that I found through hiking. Each girl shared the same worry about hiking-safety. I'm proud to say that I was able to give them a safe space to explore hiking as a social and physical activity. Because the hikers were female, I felt that I could connect with them quickly over our shared fears and insecurities surrounding hiking. The process of leading the hikes grew my confidence as a leader and mentor. I'm grateful that I had the opportunity to teach others how to enjoy exercising in the outdoors.

As I've mentioned, this project challenged me on multiple levels. There were various moments when I wasn't sure if I wanted to continue with the project. The filming and hiking were the best part because it was where I felt comfortable and knowledgeable. The editing, on the other hand, came with a huge learning curve. There were no shortcuts when it came to learning how to edit. I had to take each step very slowly to learn and apply the new skills. Most of the editing consisted of trial and error, which was time-consuming but it was a good practice in patience and perseverance. All in all, I am satisfied with my project choice and final product because it is a reflection of my growth as a student and as a person.

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Music Credits

All music sourced from Blue Dot Sessions

Calm and Collected by "<https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/233727>"

Color Country by "<https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/233726>"

Gaena by "<https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/234967>"

Gallant Fantasie by "<https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/233724>"

Glass Beads by "<https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/234948>"

Lanky by "<https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/234409>"

Loopy by "<https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/234543>"

Low Coal Camper by "<https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/234541>"

Palms Down by "<https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/233685>"

Planting Flags by "<https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/234966>"

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APPENDIX B: Trail Interview Questions

Before:

- What is your name?
- What is your major?
- Why did you sign up for this?
- Have you ever hiked before? (If yes.....oh no.)
- Why haven't you hiked before?
- What barriers have you encountered when considering hiking?
 - Possible barriers: safety, time, confusion about trailheads, self-doubt, uninterested, physical ability
- What level of fitness do you consider yourself to be at?
- What are your expectations for this hike?
- How are you feeling right now?
- What're you worried about?
- What're you excited about?

On the trail (non-formal):

- What are you thinking right now?
- How does this match up to your expectations?
- Anything you want to say to the camera?

At the overlook:

- What did you think of the first half?
- Is the view worth it?
- What's going through your mind?

After:

- What did you think of the hike?
- Would you do it again?
- Do you view yourself any differently now?
- What was your favorite part? What is your least favorite part?
- Did you learn anything?
- Would you recommend this activity to a friend? Why or why not?
- Anything else that you would like to share?

APPENDIX C: Participant Waivers

Katie Hopper Thesis 2023-2024

RELEASE FORM

Release executed by:

Your Name		UTC ID	
Current address			

I, the undersigned, in full recognition of the risks and hazards inherent to which I may be exposed during my participation in hiking the Chattanooga region thereto, and further, I do for myself, my heirs and personal representative(s) hereby defend, hold harmless, indemnify, and release, and forever discharge all officers, agents, and employees from and against any and all claims, demands, and actions or causes of action, on account of damage to personal property or personal injury or death which may result from my participation and which result from causes beyond the control of and without the fault or negligence of the UTC, its officers, agents or employees, during the period of my participation as aforesaid. I, the undersigned, also consent to video and picture likeness being recorded and reproduced for the purpose of Katie Hopper's thesis documentary.

In witness whereof, I have caused this release to be executed on

_____ (MM/DD/YYYY).

Your signature	
----------------	--

Release and Waiver of Liability and Assumption of Risk

Your Name		UTC ID	
-----------	--	--------	--

I hereby assume the risk of inconvenience and harm and release the State of Tennessee, the University of Tennessee Board of Trustees, and UTC, as well as the agents, employees, and members of the aforementioned from all actions, causes of actions, damages, claims or demands which I, my heirs, executors, administrators or assigns may have against any and all of the aforementioned for any and all personal injuries or death known and unknown which I have or may incur by participation in the above-stated class and for all damages to my property.

By participating in this project and hike I certify that I am physically, mentally, and emotionally capable of full participation. I realize that I am responsible for any injuries to persons or property that may be incurred as a result of my participation in this project.

I expressly agree that the foregoing Release and Waiver of Liability and Assumption of Risk are intended to be as broad and inclusive as is permitted by Tennessee law and that if any portion thereof is held invalid, it is agreed that the balance shall, notwithstanding, continue in full legal force and effect.

I, the undersigned, am at least 18 years of age. I have read this Release and Waiver of Liability and Assumption of Risk, understand all of its terms, and recognize and accept any risk associated with the program and its conditions.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF I have executed this Agreement on the day and year first written below.

Your Signature		Date (MM/DD/YYYY)	
----------------	--	----------------------	--

Medical Information and Emergency Contact

1. Do you have any specific health concerns that might limit your activity? If so, please describe here.
2. In the case of an emergency, we need to know how to help you. Are there any other precautions or requirements that the instructors should know about?
3. Who should we contact in case of an emergency?

Name
Relationship
Phone
Alternate Contact
Phone

By signing this document, participants release UTC and any agent acting on its behalf from liability. Any failure by the participant to disclose any potentially serious medical (physical and/or mental) condition to the instructors releases UTC and any agents acting on behalf of the University of Tennessee System. Participants with any potentially serious medical condition may require the written approval from a medical specialist.

Your Signature	
Date (MM/DD/YYYY)	

APPENDIX D: Script

(Music starts playing, walking pov is playing)

Hi. My name is Katie Hopper and I'm a student at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. While in college, I've heard many of my friends talk about the stress and negative emotions that they experience. My friends are not the only ones. A recent survey found that 67% of college students feel tremendously stressed and another 51% of students report feeling hopeless at some point in their college career. At times I've also felt stressed and hopeless, however, hiking has become an outlet for me. If you've spent any time outside, you've probably experienced the calming effect of nature. If you still aren't convinced, a study published in the *Frontiers of Psychology* journal found that....

“As little as 10–20 minutes spent sitting or walking in nature has a beneficial effect on college-aged adults' mental health...[but] an equal amount of time spent outdoors in urbanized settings does not have the same effect.”

Nature is clearly good for our health. So why doesn't everyone seek time in nature? What are the barriers that keep college students specifically from spending time outside?

To find the answers to my questions, I decided to take new hikers out on a trail for the first time. Before recruiting people, I found a trail that would offer a challenge, while also being rewarding. The trail I decided on was Edward's Point on Signal Mountain. It is located about 20 minutes from UTC's campus

(Footage of trail)

(Pause a bit)

The hike is an out-and-back that totals right at 4 miles. So, it's more than just a walk in the woods.

The trail has a few noteworthy features. Near the start is a swinging bridge that crosses the water. The bridge is perfectly secure, however the swaying can be intimidating.

(Show the bridge)

The trail is also full of rocky areas, which is an added obstacle. Especially for first-time hikers

(Show the rocky path)

In the middle of the hike, you come to the main event, an overlook of the Tennessee River and the city of Chattanooga. This is Edwards Point.

(show overlook footage)

My friend Katibeth accompanied me on a few hikes at Edwards Point, and she described the trail best...

(KB footage)

Once I had my trail selected, it was time to find some college students who had never hiked. 5 female students volunteered to hike with me. Prior to our hikes, I gave each student minimal information because I wanted them to experience the hike as authentically as possible. Of course, I suggested they bring water and snacks and dress for the weather, but other than that, I didn't give many details.

(change in music and visuals??)

LAYTON

(Layton freeze frame)

This is Layton, our first hiker. She's a sophomore studying civil engineering. She'd been on long walks before, but she was a bit apprehensive about how that would translate to a hike. It's safe to say that she wasn't sure what to expect considering her prior knowledge about hiking came only from the movie "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty". She is an avid listener of the true-crime podcast National Parks After Dark, so as you can imagine part of the reason she'd never hiked before was fear. In her words she considers herself to be "decently in shape". However, the steep

areas of this trail are challenging for even the most athletic. Here are her thoughts after a significant incline....

(Layton out of breath clip)

So maybe she underestimated the trail a bit. After a few more inclines, we made it to a rest point.

(Layton at Alexian brothers overlook, interview)

Hiking isn't always easy, but Layton felt how rewarding it can be to hike, and she hadn't even seen the overlook yet. As we approached the view, it was quite crowded. But that didn't take away from the beauty.

(Layton overlook interview)

After resting, we spent some time taking in the view before heading back to the trailhead.

(hiking clip)

There are a lot of ups and downs on this trail, and I wanted to hear Layton's thoughts on which was easier.

(Layton interview)

(crossing bridge clip)

As an engineering major Layton had some strong emotions about the swinging bridge.

(Layton bridge interview)

After the bridge, we had a short walk to the end.

Layton was worn out by the end, but she shared with me that she was grateful for the experience and hoped to hike again in the future.

AUDREY

The second hiker is Audrey. She is a freshman studying chemical engineering. Growing up in Memphis, she didn't have access to any hiking trails. Once moving to Chattanooga she wanted to

try hiking, but wasn't sure how to do it and didn't want to go alone. She signed up for this hike because she was ready to try something new. At the beginning of the hike, Audrey said "If I fall, feel free to laugh". And..she fell.

(Audrey tripping clip)

Audrey felt confident in her ability to hike, however, she made sure I knew that she was slightly below average when it came to being in shape. She wasn't a fan of the inclines.

(Audrey "steep")

It's hard to determine how long a trail will take when you first begin hiking. Audrey didn't plan enough time into her schedule so we had to turn around early. She wasn't able to see Edwards Point, but she was still able to see the beauty of nature. Here are her thoughts about the trail at our halfway point...

(interview clip)

We turned around and headed back. We stopped to look at some of the rock formations when Audrey said something that could only come from someone who had never hiked before "It's like mine craft in real life"

So yeah, I guess that's what you get when you take new hikers out for the first time. We continued on for a few more minutes until we neared the end of the hike. Audrey had some final feelings about the hike before having to head home.

BRE

(Bre freeze frame)

Our third hiker is Bre. She's a sociology major. She signed up for this hike because she was intrigued by the idea of hiking. Up to this point in time she just wasn't interested in it. In her opinion, there weren't any barriers to hiking, just lack of desire. She said that she had always assumed people got murdered in the woods, so she had understandably avoided hiking.

(uphill hike video)

Out of all the hikers, Bre rated her fitness the lowest. She described her fitness level as being “very out of shape”.

(mid-interview)

Even though Bre wasn't confident in her abilities, she did well creatively navigating the trail by holding on to branches here and there.

(overlook approach)

We were super lucky on this hike and had the overlook all to ourselves. As we sat and rested I asked Bre what her thoughts were about the trail up to this point.

(interview)

Bre faced two obstacles while hiking that the other hikers didn't. She didn't wear clothes that were very suitable for hiking and she was recovering from being sick. So a lot of our interactions on the trail looked like this.

(tired interview)

Bre was a trooper and handled her first hike very well. However, like everyone else, she wasn't a huge fan of the hills.

(big hill clip)

We climbed the last few rises to reach the end of our hike. When we finished, Bre shared her thoughts about the overall experience.

(post-interview)

I think it is safe to say that Bre enjoyed her first hike. She compared it to watching a movie and then wanting to change your whole personality. So basically, she's a hiker girly now.

GRACE

(Grace freeze frame)

Grace is the 4th hiker to take on this adventure. She's an environmental science major, with a concentration in policy and planning. Like Audrey, Grace grew up in the city and wasn't exposed to hiking. As an environmental science major, she wanted a reason to get outside more. For her, the main barrier had always been who to hike with, because hiking alone can be nerve-racking.

(uphill walk)

Grace said that she runs often and would describe her fitness as an 8 out of 10. She also mentioned that she has great breath control. Even with her fitness level, some of the hills got to her.

(water break clip)

We continued up towards the overlook. Here are Grace's thoughts about the hike and how she thinks the second half of it will go.

(sliding on leaf clip)

Like Bre, Grace didn't wear the right shoes for hiking, so she had to be extra careful. She talked about slipping a lot on the trail.

(scooting clip)

Out of all 5 hikers, Grace was the most creative when it came to avoiding slipping. I was impressed with how well her scooting method worked.

(post-interview)

Well I think she said it best! Go Grace!

ALEXIS

(Alexis freeze frame)

Our 5th and final hiker is Alexis. She's a communications major in her junior year. She is also collegiate athlete on the UTC women's golf team. As a college athlete she considers herself to be in very good shape. But just like Grace, the hills got to her too.

(hill interview)

Alexis grew up spending time outside, but she'd never hiked before because she's always been too busy with golf. She was excited to take the time out of her busy schedule to walk somewhere besides the golf course.

(walking footage)

For our hike we went early in the morning so we had the entire overlook to ourselves. The leaves had already peaked, but the view was still breathtaking. Alexis shared how her mood had changed as the hike progressed.

Overlook footage

We started our journey back, but Alexis had to be extra careful going down the rocks. She was worried that she would injure herself. But she didn't. She navigated the rocks perfectly. Here are some of her thoughts from the trail.

(in-progress interview)

We had the whole trail to ourselves, so we got to take our time on the way back to the trailhead. After the hike, Alexis reflected on her plan to hike in the future.

(post-interview)

Here's to hoping that she finds the motivation to hike again in the future because it truly is wonderful!

CONCLUSION

(footage with me in it)

improve about how I enjoyed the process and hope that people will go hiking after seeing the documentary

APPENDIX E: Equipment and Software Images

iPhone used for filming



Tripod used for filming



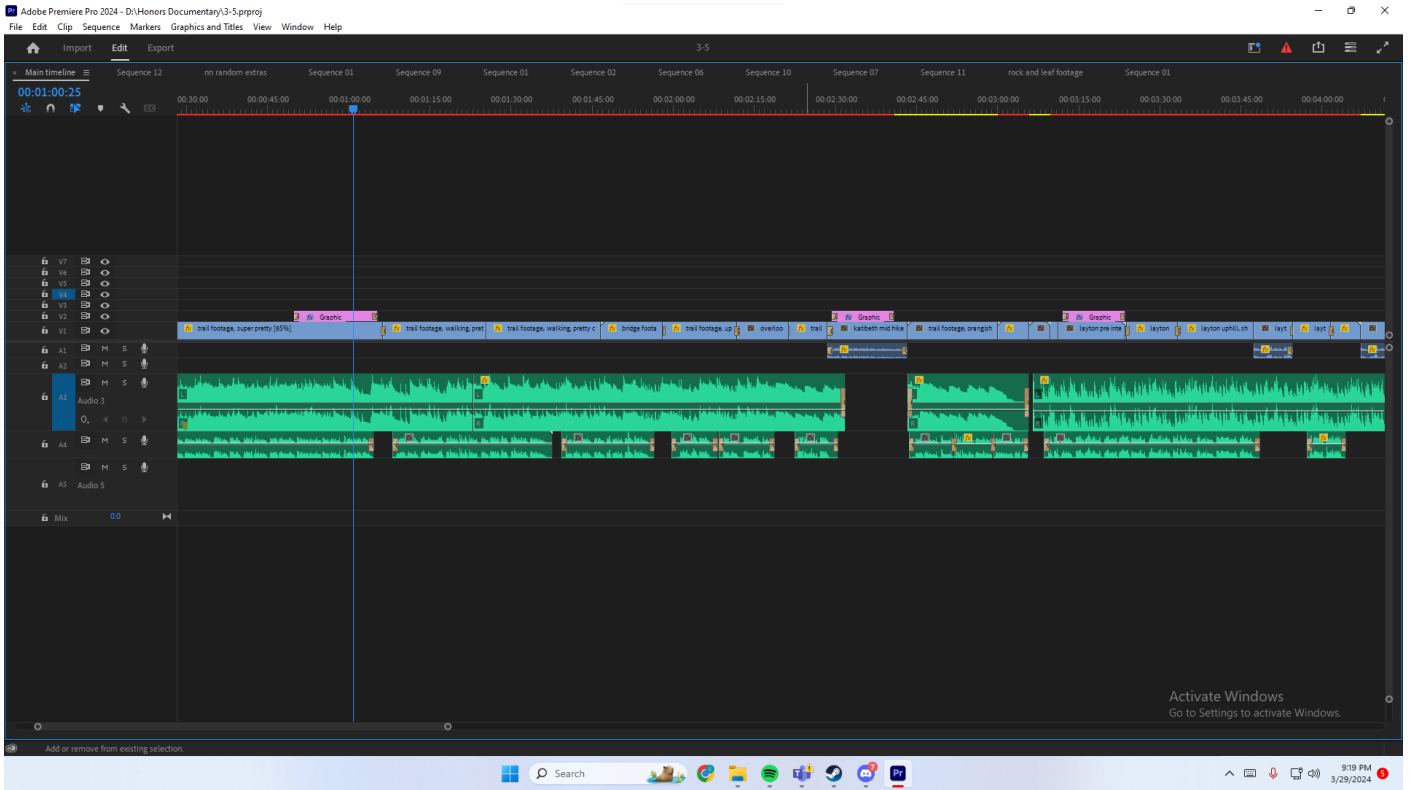
Microphone used for voiceover



Hard drive used for storage



Timeline sample from Adobe Premier Pro



Footage organization sample

