

## Getting to Know Your Hike Leaders: Profiling Sajedeh Zahraei

*The Club is re-starting a hike leader profile series so you will get to know more about our team. Today we asked Sajedeh Zahraei to tell us more about herself.*



*This photo was taken in Cheltenham Badlands - Nov 4, 2023 on the last day of Toronto E2E hike series.*

### **When and why did you decide to become a Hike Leader?**

I decided to become a hike leader in 2021. Hiking with my friends and family during the COVID-19 Pandemic was a very special time, the only time that we could connect with each other and with nature. It helped us reduce social isolation, maintain our physical and mental health. When I saw the recruitment emails about training new hike leaders, I was immediately drawn to it and responded right away. I missed going on bus hikes and I thought this would be a great way to connect with other BTC hike leaders and learn new things and dream about leading hikes. I am a social worker/psychotherapist by training and I'm very much interested in offering holistic services incorporating nature hikes, yoga, and mindfulness and bringing people together to build community and connections.

### **Why should GTA residents get outside and enjoy the Bruce Trail?**

The Bruce Trail is an incredible natural resource that we should all go out to visit and enjoy. We are all very fortunate to have this treasured resource available to us and owe a debt of gratitude to Indigenous communities, the original inhabitants of this land who protected and preserved the lands for us to enjoy. It is important for us to not only go out and visit it, but to learn about its history, current conditions, and play an active part in helping preserve it for generations to come. My main interest is to work with immigrant, refugee, newcomer communities and contribute to developing a sense of belonging and connection to the land and build relationships with Indigenous communities. Going out to the Bruce Trail, being in nature, learning about the history and building connections with the land and its original inhabitants is a great way to feel

our interconnections as human beings and work together to act on our responsibility to protect our natural habitat, and be part of the solution to the many challenges facing us today.

**What do you love about volunteering with the BTC? What are all the ways you're involved with the Bruce Trail? (e.g. Hike Leader, trail maintenance, booth volunteer, etc.)**

What I love most about volunteering with BTC is meeting enthusiastic hikers who come out on the hikes. It brings me so much joy to see them enjoying the hikes, connecting with each other, sharing joy, laughter, ideas, tips and memories of different hikes they have been on or sharing plans of new hikes they like to go on. They are so encouraging and motivating me to plan future hikes. It's so wonderful to connect with other people who share the same passion and love of nature. It makes me feel that I belong to a caring community with a common vision.

**What types of hikes do you lead?**

I like planning and leading urban hikes in Toronto. Mainly because I have lived in Toronto for most of my life. I came here in 1987 as a 19-year old refugee. I faced many challenges during the first few years of arrival in Toronto. Hiking in Toronto parks and neighbourhoods helped me get through those difficult times. Going out for a walk always brought me joy and helped give me a new perspective. I love Toronto with all the diversity it has to offer both in terms of nature and community and infrastructure that it has to offer. That's why I like to lead urban hikes that focus on the history of Toronto's parks and neighbourhoods. Last fall I led a series of hikes entitled "Fall Colours in Toronto Parks and Ravines" and I'm currently leading a series of hikes entitled "Graffiti Art, Culture, and Nature in Toronto."

In both of these series, my intention was to both learn and share with hikers the history of the land and honour its original inhabitants, trace the social and cultural history of Toronto's parks, ravines, and neighbourhoods to examine how the city came to be the way it is; explore the impacts that settler colonialism and immigration trends have had on the natural environment and infrastructure in the city; and learn about what we can do together now as a community to make the city a better place for all of us. I have learned a lot through organizing these hikes and I'm so encouraged to see all the excitement and interest in these hikes. I think what makes these hikes unique is that they are accessible, free of charge, and they offer a lot of learning opportunities to discover hidden history, art, culture, and nature in the city.

**What is an upcoming hike that you're leading that you'd like to promote? (Please tell us a few bullet points about it).**

I am continuing the series of Graffiti Art, Culture, and Nature in Toronto with a hike on April 27th when we will explore Parkdale - Queen West neighbourhoods. Starting on May 25th, I will be venturing in offering a series of E-2-E hikes to complete the Caledon section of the Bruce Trail.