



## DANIEL PEDDLE

FOR HIS NEW MOVIE, CASTING DIRECTOR AND FILMMAKER DANIEL PEDDLE FOUND HIS SUBJECT MATTER A LONG WAY OFF THE FASHION CIRCUIT. HIS STARS LEAD THE SIMPLE LIFE, BUT THEIR BELIEF SYSTEMS MAY RESONATE FAR OFF THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL

TEXT BY CHRISTOPHER BARTLEY

Daniel Peddle spends a lot of time looking at beautiful faces, placing them in runway shows and the glossiest magazines. But for his film work, the New York-based casting director, who speaks with a delightful Southern twang, has been known to turn his eye toward the less glamorous, depicting what life is like at the peripheries of society. His 2005 debut film *The Aggressives* documented an urban subculture of butch lesbians in a searing study of gender identity. His new project, *Trail Angels*, travels to the backwoods of America to expose another fringe group: the transient hikers and helpers who provide support, guidance, and supplies—not to mention food and water—to hikers on the Appalachian Trail, and do so simply out of the goodness of their hearts. The lesson to be learned is not that the simple life is somehow more fulfilling, but that the basic tenets of respect and generosity can be infinitely rewarding.

**Christopher Bartley** You seem to have an interest in documenting subcultures and fringe communities.

**Daniel Peddle** Well, I studied anthropology and one of the sociocultural terms we threw around was liminality, which is a social terrain where people experiment outside cultural norms. After *The Aggressives* I knew I wanted to do another film, I was just waiting for the bells of truth to go off in my head. One of my friends has a cabin up in New Hampshire and he took me on this hike that turned into this near-death experience. There was this huge blizzard on the mountain and we were totally unprepared for it...physically it was very tough. Once we got back, we were like, What just happened? And my friend said, "We really could have used a trail angel to help us." He then began to describe to me this whole trail angel community, these unsung heroes of the Appalachian Trail. We did a lot of research and read a lot of books and we just started talking to people, and we hit the trail and discovered this amazing world.

**CB** What was the most surprising thing about these people?

**DP** That they were so genuine in their desire to live this golden rule: helping others. You know, hiking the trail is this equating experience. There are people of all different

ages and races. It becomes not about who you are in the real world anymore, but about experiencing this together.

**CB** Are they subsidized for their work in any way?

**DP** No, they do it out of the goodness of their heart. For one of the characters, it became a little bit of a career for a moment. She ran a hostel out of her home, but she didn't make much money, probably just enough. The other three characters operated solely on donations.

**CB** How did it change your perspective on your daily work?

**DP** Well, it was four years of arduous work. It pointed out to me this community of blue-collar, working class Americans. They are not crunchy granola types at all. I think the film ended up being a slice of American pie in a really unexpected way.

**CB** What was your personal attraction to the project?

**DP** There is this inherent tragedy to it that was appealing to me. As a casting director I have this moment in people's lives that might be a certain milestone for them. But then afterward we may not see each other ever again, or very seldom.

**CB** So in a way there's this parallel of transience between your work and the work of the trail angels.

**DP** Well, they are outsiders. They have gotten fired, or retired, or they're just graduating from high school or college. They operate through the spring and summer and they are hiking nearly every single day for five to six months. They develop almost this separate language. Like for instance if they skip a day of hiking, they call it a "zero day."

**CB** How do you become a trail angel?

**DP** Most of the angels are former hikers. People hike the trail and it changes them for the rest of their lives so they choose to become part of the community. There is actually some discussion that there are too many of these do-gooders, and this is making the journey less difficult, and hikers are relying too heavily on the trail angels rather than preparing for themselves. But they all become part of this extended family commune and return again and again. In the end it's about communing with nature and reconnecting with the essence of life. They are willing to make a sacrifice so other people can experience that.

