

MOUNTAINS

WORD FROM THE SMOKIES

Writer in residence finally gets to popular park



Word from the Smokies
Frances Figart
Columnist

Sue Wasserman of Bakersville is the 2022 Steve Kemp Writer-in-Residence, which means she will be living near and working in Great Smoky Mountains National Park for six weeks. She'll be writing, creating photography and offering public programs both on the Tennessee and North Carolina sides of the park.

Wasserman was chosen for this role in 2019 by a panel of board members and Smokies authors assembled by Great Smoky Mountains Association, which coordinates and funds the residency. But the pandemic prevented GSMA from hosting her until now.

Spreading her stay in the Smokies over several time periods that began in April, Wasserman is being mentored by the program's namesake, Steve Kemp, who was the director of interpretive products and services with GSMA for 30 years, publishing books, magazines and other materials that still help to preserve the park.

"Having a walk and dinner with Steve to kick things off was truly awesome — especially given our shared love of nature and writing," Wasserman said. "After waiting for more than two years to come to the Smokies for this residency, I am tremendously excited to start on this work and also to be an ambassador for GSMA."

Wasserman's articles have appeared in the New York Times, Southern Living, Smokies Life and the Atlanta Journal Constitution among others. She has published and promoted two books — "A Moment's Notice" and "Walk with Me: Exploring Nature's Wisdom" — both pairing nature photography with reflective writing.

In some ways, Wasserman's immersion in the Smokies represents a return to the natural world of her childhood in White Meadow Lake, New Jersey.

"The lake was literally in our front yard," she said. "I can't tell you how many hours I spent hanging out on the dock or this one stretch of grass at the shoreline just watching the ripples. We had a tree on the lakefront that had this huge opening. My sister and I made up countless adventures in that space."

Wasserman explained that White Meadow was essentially a Jewish com-



Sue Wasserman stands beneath a massive root ball on the Cucumber Gap Loop in the Smokies. PROVIDED BY A SPRING WILDFLOWER PILGRIMAGE PARTICIPANT

munity that formed due to antisemitism that prevented families from living elsewhere.

"That's how my parents got there in the mid 1960s," she said. "One of my mom's best friends from the Bronx lived there and, when my folks discovered they weren't welcome in Mountain Lakes, they opted for White Meadow."

Wasserman went to Ohio State on a fencing scholarship — she laughs about how far she is now from fencing — and from there she embarked on a marketing career based in large cities like Atlanta. It wasn't until she was in her late 40s, she says, that the flowers started calling her to return to life amid the natural world.

"It took a lot of years of unlearning to come back to the person I think I was always meant to be," she told me. "And yet, it's all the experiences in my corporate life that allow me to do what I do now."

Wasserman is passionate about nature and teaching others about it. She loves working with both adults and chil-



Sue Wasserman of Bakersville, North Carolina, is the 2022 Steve Kemp Writer-in-Residence, a program coordinated by Great Smoky Mountains Association and named for its former director of interpretive products and services. PROVIDED BY DEBORAH GREENHOUSE

dren, using language and nature to evoke each other's nuances.

"I can't believe I've been living in Western North Carolina for the past 10 years without getting to know the Smokies," she said. "I feel like every trail has a story it wants to tell through the landscape, wildflowers, animals, and insects. I want to understand those stories better."

She also believes, like many, that what makes the Smokies so special are the stories of the people who lived on the land before it became a national park — both the settlers and the Indigenous people before them.

"I want to learn more about those stories, too, and give thanks to those who let go of such a magical place to allow people from around the world to feel the magic of the landscape that was part of their heritage," said Wasserman.

Based on her experiences in the park over six weeks, Wasserman will create essays and images to be shared in GSMA's Smokies Life journal and its Smokies Live blog.

One project will have the theme "Hike-Ooh," about which Wasserman said, "I find immense joy in writing Haiku, a form of poetry whose influence is often nature. These simple poems also pair well with nature photography. My goal is to compile a series of these poems and images inspired by my experiences in the park with the possibility of culminating in a book."

Another planned project is the Perspectives Quilt, an interactive creation

that will begin with Wasserman asking questions like: How do others view nature? How does it make them feel? Do some perspectives stem from cultural bias? It will ultimately involve park visitors discovering their own perspectives on how to find inspiration in nature — and sharing in the collaborative creation of the quilt.

"There is a concept in Judaism — tikkun olam — that means 'to repair the world,' and that each of us is responsible for doing something toward that end," she said, adding that much of who she is and what she does is steeped in that concept.

"Nature, it seems to me, offers so many life lessons if we're paying attention, if I'm paying attention," Wasserman concluded. "Through my meanderings in the Smokies, I continue learning more about myself, and in doing that, I become clearer about how I can give back to those around me. I'm not sure I can think of a greater gift than that."

If you would like to participate in some way in Sue Wasserman's residency projects, she would love to hear from you at walkwithme62@gmail.com.

Frances Figart is the editor of the bi-annual journal "Smokies Life" and the Creative Services Director for the 29,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Reach her at frances@gsmassoc.org and learn more at SmokiesInformation.org.

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