

MOUNTAINS

Parks as Classrooms' experiences engaging



Word from the Smokies
Frances Figart
Columnist

Courtney Lix grew up entwined in the natural and cultural history of Great Smoky Mountains National Park like a vine climbing up an ancient tree. Her grandfather, Henry Lix, was a park service employee who came to the Smokies to work as a naturalist in 1951. By 1953, he had founded the Great Smoky Mountains Natural History Association (today Great Smoky Mountains Association) in order to enhance visitor understanding of the many remarkable attributes of the Smokies.

"Most of my memories from elementary school in the 1990s have faded with the decades," wrote Courtney Lix in an article for the spring 2022 issue of Smokies Life. "But a handful are still as sharp as the day they happened: stepping from bright sun into the cool, musty darkness of the grist mill at Cades Cove. The surprising sweetness of a wild blackberry. Squeals and nervous giggles as my classmates and I crouched at the side of the trail, looking for bugs in the leaf litter."

These experiences were all part of Parks as Classrooms, a decades-old educational collaboration between schools and Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The program's lessons for kindergarten through high school students focus on science, culture, and history intermingled with emotional development and an appreciation for nature.

"PAC is one of our longest-running educational programs," said Laurel Rematore, CEO of Great Smoky Mountains Association. "Nearby Pi Beta Phi Elementary School in Gatlinburg has a GSMA employee, Melissa Crisp, embedded in the school as a coordinator. She ensures students have about 40 experiences in the park between first and sixth grade!"

Starting out in the early 1990s as a partnership with Pi Beta Phi, the program has grown to reach more than 80 elementary, middle, and high schools in Tennessee and North Carolina annually. In a typical school year, more than 14,000 students and several thousand adults participate in the program. Kids learn about everything from air pollution and biodiversity to African American history and the Civil War.

"It's a really unique teaching role," says Crisp, who has been in the position



The ozone garden biomonitoring project at Purchase Knob is one of many different curriculum-based community science projects coordinated with Tennessee and North Carolina middle and high schools.

since 2009. "I've got a foot in two different worlds. I'm working with the national park, but also with school administrators, teachers, parents, and kids to facilitate the field trips, while also making sure our curriculum is updated every year to best match changes in state testing."

The park is able to partner with Pi Beta Phi Elementary through the support of GSMA and Friends of the Smokies. Park rangers work closely with teachers at Pi Beta Phi in the development of new programs and improvement of existing programs. Park staff also attend family nights and award ceremonies at Pi Beta Phi multiple times each year to connect with students and their parents and families – all with the goal of creating stronger relationships in the park gateway community of Gatlinburg.

"Park staff also work closely with teachers to provide staff trainings in the park," said Jessie Snow-Neeley, an education ranger who has taught PAC lessons for three five years. "In the past few



Great Smoky Mountains National Park education branch coordinator Susan Sachs shows students how to weigh a salamander during a Parks as Classrooms session.

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY PARKS AS CLASSROOMS

years, we have seen that more and more students are Spanish learners. So, one emphasis is to develop program materials that are understandable and relevant to this demographic with the ultimate goal of having more staff who are able to communicate with students and their families in Spanish."

Thus far during the 2022-23 school year, park staff have provided one teacher workshop in the park (serving 20 teachers) and three community/family days at the school for Pi Beta Phi Elementary. As Lix explains in her article, "A Great Place to Learn: Celebrating over 30 years of Parks as Classrooms in the Smokies," park staff as well as administrators and teachers from many different schools are dedicated to securing funding so that students who have never visited the park before, often from underserved populations, can step into the lush beauty of the mountains.

"Sometimes kids get off the bus and can't quite place what they're hearing – and then they realize it's a mountain stream," wrote Lix. "They are literally discovering a new world."

Lix confesses that, as a kid growing up enmeshed with the park, she took the PAC experiences for granted. "I got to see the effects of ozone pollution on plants first-hand. I could learn about a food web by identifying aquatic insects

in a mountain stream and talking about what might eat them. As an adult, I marvel at the planning, care, and extraordinary amount of work it took to create the program, and how Parks as Classrooms has continued to evolve and thrive for decades."

Earlier this year, Great Smoky Mountains Association received a certificate of appreciation from Sevier County Schools Superintendent Stephanie Huskey on behalf of Pi Beta Phi Elementary for the park's continuing partnership with them. Snow-Neeley wrote to GSMA CEO Rematore: "Thank you from the Smokies team for the work you do to care for this partnership!"

Becoming immersed in the biodiversity in the national park inspires younger generations to care about and protect Great Smoky Mountains National Park. If you would like to read more about this historic educational partnership, visit smokiesinformation.org and order the Spring 2022 issue of the award-winning Smokies Life journal.

Frances Figart is the editor of 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. Learn more at SmokiesInformation.org and reach the author at frances@gsmassoc.org.

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