

MOUNTAINS

WORD FROM THE SMOKIES:

Association connects veterans to the outdoors



Word from the Smokies
Miranda Bemis
USA TODAY NETWORK

Tranquil water bubbles in a cold mountain stream. In the distance, hikers can be heard making their way to the trailhead. Trees are adorned with lichens and mosses. The sun is shining, and there is not a cloud in the sky. It is a fantastic day for a hike.

One of the thousands of visitors hiking in Great Smoky Mountains National Park today is Gessika Guerra, here because the park feeds her dual passions of adventure and learning. But she is also here to design an experience for people who need to connect to the healing that outdoor environments often bring.

Guerra is an eight-year Navy veteran. She spent six years on active duty, including time stationed in San Diego working on an aircraft carrier. Now she is a Veterans Outreach intern with National Parks Conservation Association, eager to contribute to a program designed especially for veterans to learn about NPCA and the National Park Service.

“My goal is to create daily experiences in the parks that are not only educational and adventurous but also safe,” Guerra said. “I want to encourage the veterans to bond, to laugh, to tell their tales, and find camaraderie in a national park setting.”

Since 2016, NPCA has worked to provide advocacy opportunities for veterans, service members, and their families by connecting them to park protection campaigns. NPCA’s Veterans Program Manager Jimi Shaughnessy is working to build on this progress and identify even more meaningful opportunities to get veterans into our national parks, educate them on the issues facing parks, and empower them to lead the way.

“My unique relationship with national parks is motivated by a love of country, an affinity for continued service, and a desire to share the legacy of the country I fought for in uniform,” Shaughnessy said. “NPCA understands this connection that I have, that Gessika has, and that so many other veterans



Since 2016, National Parks Conservation Association has worked to provide opportunities for veterans, service members, and their families by connecting them to park protection campaigns. The nonprofit seeks to educate veterans on issues facing parks such as Olympic National Park where this group is hiking. JIMI SHAUGHNESSY, NATIONAL PARKS CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

have with our parks.”

Studying recreation and wildland management at the University of Tennessee, Guerra learned that people who frequently visit an outdoor space care for it more with every visit and also reap benefits in the realm of personal well-being. NPCA’s Veterans Program events focus on educating veterans on wild spaces while building community.

“It can be hard to talk to anyone,” Guerra explained. “I know from my own experience that the outdoors is not just for physical health. It is also for increased mental and emotional health. The Smokies have offered me those types of experiences.”

Guerra shared a special moment of growth she experienced on a hike in the Smokies. She happened to find a salamander near the trail and was able to use the research skills and confidence-building experiences she learned in the Navy to educate other hikers about the need to protect this tiny creature.

“I was timid as a mouse before the Navy,” Guerra said. “I left a fearless, forward person. That fearless behavior, I learned, helps people.”

Guerra wants to continue her experiences working with other veterans to help them feel safe and inspired to do something similar, using their confidence and communication skills to educate the public about conservation. Her first event, set for May 13, centers

around an important new conservation initiative: Safe Passage: The I-40 Pigeon River Gorge Wildlife Crossing Project.

There is a documented rise in motor vehicle collisions with wildlife in East Tennessee and Western North Carolina near the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. A 28-mile stretch of highway near the Smokies’ boundary is a key focus area for a group of nearly 20 federal, state, tribal, and non-governmental organizations collaborating to find solutions.

“Wildlife have traversed our landscapes for centuries in search of food, mates, and territory,” said Guerra. “These animals struggle to make sense of interstate traffic and are often victims of vehicle collisions.”

When I-40 was created in the 1960s, there were no elk here and maybe only 500 bears. The highway sliced through a mountain landscape where for millennia animals had freely followed ancient corridors. Now the highway cuts the Smokies off from other large public lands — Cherokee and Pisgah National Forests — and there are nearly 2,000 bears and likely 200 elk moving in and out of the park. Safe Passage promotes the development of dedicated wildlife crossings to reduce collisions with these animals — and the first of these is underway at the Harmon Den exit.

“I plan to lead a hike over the Appalachian National Scenic Trail via Chest-

nut Hill Trail in the Smokies and end at the Appalachian Trail crossing of I-40 at Waterville Road,” says Guerra. “I want my veteran guests to enjoy the tranquility of the forest before hitting the unpleasant wall of noise when approaching I-40. It is one thing to preach how dangerous the interstate is for wildlife; it is another to experience it for yourself.”

NPCA will host a series of additional outings in 2023 focused on the education and conservation of parks in and around East Tennessee and Western North Carolina. These events include hiking, wildlife viewing, and stargazing, as well as trail maintenance and stewardship.

“Veterans have a special relationship with our national parks from Gettysburg — the site of one of the most consequential battles in American history — to Yosemite, where Buffalo Soldiers served as some of the park’s first rangers,” Shaughnessy said. “All of our parks reflect the American values and ideals veterans fought to protect, which is why their voices are necessary to protect and enhance our parks for future generations.”

If you are interested in participating in veteran outings in East Tennessee and Western North Carolina, please contact Gessika Guerra at gguerra@npca.org or find more details online at meetup.com/veterans-for-national-parks. For national events, partnership opportunities, and all items related to the Veterans Program, please reach out to Jimi Shaughnessy at Jshaughnessy@npca.org.

The Safe Passage Fund Coalition — represented by The Conservation Fund, Defenders of Wildlife, Great Smoky Mountains Association, National Parks Conservation Association, North Carolina Wildlife Federation, The Wilderness Society, and Wildlands Network — makes it possible for donations to be collected for future road mitigation and wildlife crossing structures between Asheville and Knoxville. Learn more at SmokiesSafePassage.org.

Miranda Bemis is a graphic designer 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 Miranda@gsmassoc.org.

White Horse Black Mountain transitions to nonprofit business model

Karrigan Monk
Black Mountain News
USA TODAY NETWORK

For the Hinkle family, White Horse Black Mountain has never been just a music venue.

Opened in 2008 in the “jaws of recession,” as owner Bob Hinkle put it, the venue has survived economic recessions and a pandemic.

“It became kind of an institution around here after a while, and it was an awful lot of fun and an awful lot of work,” Hinkle said. “It had its high points and its low points, but one thing became very clear, and that was that nobody’s going to get rich doing this.”

Bob Hinkle’s son, Zach Hinkle, said his father had, since the beginning of White Horse Black Mountain, prioritized things that are “good for the community and good for music and creativity, but bad for the bottom line.”

Zach Hinkle said these include putting the customer first and serving as a community center. He said operating in this way impacts the bottom line and that his father was “essentially running it as a nonprofit.”

Now, Bob Hinkle and White Horse



Bob Hinkle (left) and his son Zach Hinkle (right) have worked to transition White Horse Black Mountain from a for-profit music venue to a nonprofit. KARRIGAN MONK

Black Mountain are starting a new chapter, one that he said feels like “the right thing.”

Following a launch party April 21, the venue is now officially a nonprofit.

Bob Hinkle said he was often asked if he was a nonprofit in the past, and his answer would always be “not on purpose.” He said he is looking forward to doing things as a nonprofit.

“There are some things you can do

with a nonprofit that you can’t do with a for-profit company,” Bob Hinkle said. “We can apply for grants, for instance, which you can’t usually if you’re a for-profit company. We can accept donations, and that’s also something else you can’t do, and you can have a completely different kind of relationship with other nonprofits.”

Along with this, White Horse Black Mountain has also introduced membership tiers. Starting as a \$60 per year Appaloosa student membership and ending at a \$4,800 or more a year Arabian level, members receive a wide-ranging array of perks. These perks include lapel pins, T-shirts, discounts and tickets to White Horse events.

Zach Hinkle said the nonprofit onboarded more than 60 members the night of the launch party alone.

“It was an incredibly meaningful moment because it highlighted what we kind of knew, but you never really know until it actually happens,” Zach Hinkle said. “When the community says, ‘This place isn’t just a music venue to us. This place has real meaning for us as a community. We think of it as our living room and we want it to stay.’ They all showed up.”

In the past, Bob Hinkle said the venue has hosted more than 50 benefits, including for local entities like a recent event for the Black Mountain Counseling Center to events for a global impact like a benefit show for Haiti.

The Hinkles said White Horse Black Mountain will feel the same to anyone who comes in for a show, but Zach Hinkle said the goal of becoming a nonprofit is to become sustainable, both as a business and for his father who has been “carrying the water for 14 years on his own.”

With becoming a nonprofit comes a board of directors that Bob Hinkle said he is “pleased” with and is looking forward to working with.

Zach Hinkle said White Horse Black Mountain is his “dad’s heart” and that he has put everything he has into it. Both Hinkles said they are looking forward to the future of the venue as a nonprofit and to continue serving the community.

“You only become a nonprofit if you believe that the thing that you have really benefits the community in which you live,” Zach Hinkle said. “If they don’t believe in you, then it’s never going to work.”

Citizen Times

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

Customer service

To view important information online related to your subscription, visit aboutyoursubscription.citizen-times.com. You can also manage your subscription at account.citizen-times.com. Contact the Citizen Times for questions or to report issues to 1-800-672-2472.

Operating hours are:

- Monday-Friday: 8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.
- Saturday: 7:00 a.m. - 11:00 a.m. with limited support for Digital
- Sunday: 7:00 a.m. - 11:00 a.m.

Full access print and digital subscriptions

Subscribe and save today by visiting citizen-times.com/subscribe.

Contact us

Customer Service	1-800-672-2472
Executive Editor	Karen Chávez 828-236-8980
Advertising	828-252-5611
Obituaries	citizen-times.com/obituaries
Classifieds	classifieds.citizen-times.com

Corrections and clarifications

Our goal is to promptly correct errors. Email us at accuracy@ashevill.gannett.com to report a mistake or call 828-232-5829. Describe the error, where you saw it, the date, page number, or the URL.

Postal information

The Citizen Times, USPS# 236-000, ISSN# 0336-0000, is published 6 days per week excluding Saturday, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Thanksgiving (observed), Christmas Day (observed) and New Year’s Day (observed) by Gannett Media Corp, 14 O. Henry Ave., Asheville, NC 28802. Periodicals postage paid at Asheville, NC and additional mailing offices. **Postmaster:** Please send address changes to Customer Service, PO Box 1387, Fort Smith, AR 72902.