

Park partner rebrands as ‘Smokies Life’



Word from the Smokies
Frances Figart
Columnist

This column is now in its fifth year of sharing and celebrating all things Smokies — whether it’s the rich human history and culture of these southern Appalachian Mountains or the fascinating more-than-human communities of life that have evolved here over millennia.

If you’ve been following along from the very beginning, you’ll know that this column has been supported and underwritten by Great Smoky Mountains Association, one of four primary nonprofit partners that serve in the protection and preservation of Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

In 2023, GSMA celebrated its 70-year anniversary. Over those seven decades, this organization, my employer, has provided more than \$50 million in direct aid to the park, supporting dozens of seasonal rangers and interns who protect and interpret the 800 miles of trails, 100 historic structures, and 21,000 documented species of life preserved in the park. We operate 11 visitor centers and contact stations in and around the park, maintain a roster of 29,000-plus members, and publish a broad array of park-related books and multimedia.

Through all of our work — guided by a mission of education, interpretation, and research — GSMA has encouraged deeper connections to life in the Smokies. But we realized that the name Great Smoky Mountains Association was restrictive — not only by its length but also by being disconnected from the element most essential to our future growth and relevance: the people who visit the park.

“Though GSMA was founded as an association, its work today surpasses what that word can convey. Today, we move forward under the name Smokies Life, welcoming neighbors and visitors to engage in meaningful ways with all the park has to offer,” said Smokies Life CEO Laurel Rematore. “Guided by our organization’s ongoing mission of education, interpretation and research, our



Two hikers journey through Arch Rock along the Alum Cave Trail in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Founded in 1953, Great Smoky Mountains Association, now Smokies Life, has a 70-year history of supporting the preservation of the park. PROVIDED BY MICHELE SONS



Smokies Life sales assistant Joe McBrien rings up a customer at the new Great Smokies Welcome Center in Townsend, Tenn. Apparel and products featuring the Smokies Life logo are available for purchase at all Smokies Life visitor centers. PROVIDED BY SMOKIES LIFE

role as a partner to this incredible park is to encourage deeper connections to life in the Smokies.”

Our new name conveys a deeper and more expansive relationship to the life the park protects and the people who care about it. This new name also allows us to serve our existing supporters more faithfully while at the same time attracting new ones.

“Our new name is expansive — just like the park, with its rich history, vast landscape, natural wonders, and thousands of species,” said Geoff Cantrell, chair of the Smokies Life Board of Directors. “Smokies Life, too, reflects the diversity of the park’s visitors, their inspirations for coming, and the experiences they have while here.”

Of course, the name is not new to readers of our biannual magazine. Since both the journal and the organization are fully concerned with life — natural and cultural — in the Smokies, the name is a perfect fit for our association just as it is a perfect fit for the journal.

Today, Smokies Life is driven by the same vision that motivated the association’s founders: the desire to protect and preserve an ancient mountain range that supports more than 21,000

species of life and continues to carry deep cultural significance as the homeland of the Cherokee people as well as the home of African Americans and white settlers who lived here before the park’s creation in 1934.

This past December, Smokies Life opened its newest visitor center location, the Great Smokies Welcome Center in Townsend, Tennessee. Smokies Life maintains a daily presence at seven other visitor centers and retail bookstores in and around the park in coordination with the National Park Service, local communities, and other partners. In Tennessee, these include Cades Cove Visitor Center, Gatlinburg Welcome Center, Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont Visitor Center, and Sugarlands Visitor Center. North Carolina locations include Clingmans Dome Visitor Center, Oconaluftee Visitor Center, and Swain County Visitor Center and Museum.

A ribbon-cutting ceremony to celebrate the new Smokies Life name, as well as the grand opening of the Great Smokies Welcome Center, is being planned at the Townsend location, 7929 E. Lamar Alexander Parkway, with details to be announced later this winter or in early spring.

To align our membership program with our new brand, members of Smokies Life will become Park Keepers. Park Keeper dues protect the Smokies for future generations and help all visitors enjoy a richer, more meaningful experience.

“Our name has changed, but our core values, our dedication to the park, and our unwavering allegiance to our members remain unchanged,” Rematore said. “Our work will continue to focus on the protection and celebration of Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and this rebranding will allow us to amplify our impact and mobilize new loyal supporters and devoted ambassadors.”

Frances Figart is the editor of “Smokies Life Journal” and the Creative Services Director for the 29,000-member Smokies Life, a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting the scientific, historical, and interpretive activities of Great Smoky Mountains National Park by providing educational products and services to park visitors. For more information, visit SmokiesLife.org.

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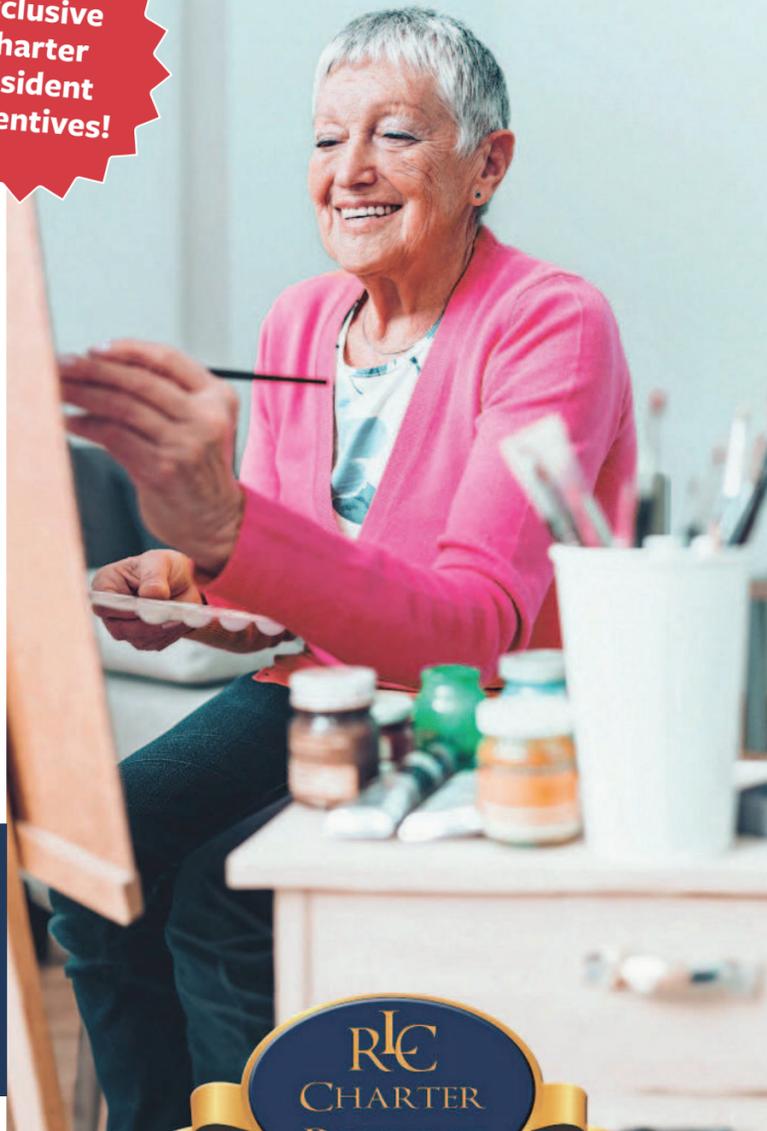
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