

MOUNTAINS

Writer makes Great Smokies her park



Word from the Smokies

Frances Figart
Columnist

In the spring of 2019, Latria (pronounced La-tray-a) Graham was chosen to be one of the first Steve Kemp writers-in-residence, spending six weeks learning and writing in Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

The residency — funded by Great Smoky Mountains Association and named for its 30-year veteran Steve Kemp — is designed to connect writers with the Smokies in meaningful ways and to inspire some of their best work.

Coming to the park from Spartanburg, South Carolina, Graham was already an accomplished journalist. A fifth-generation farmer and a graduate of Dartmouth College and The New School in New York City, Graham has been published in the New York Times, The Guardian, Southern Living, and Garden&Gun. She is a Best American Sportswriting notable for her stories on athletes in places of tension and she received a Bronze level CASE Award for her reporting on immigration policy.

In 2018, she wrote an article for Outside, “We’re Here. You Just Don’t See Us,” about her family’s relationship to nature and the stereotypes and obstacles to access that Black people often face in the outdoors.

“That article changed my life,” she said. “People paid me for speaking gigs and writing workshops. They put me on planes and flew me across the country to talk about equity, inclusion, and accountability.”

In addition to opening doors for Graham as a journalist — and establishing her role as a champion for fellow Black explorers wanting to feel comfortable in the outdoors — the article positioned her well for a residency in Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

“I came to the Smokies with dreams of writing about the natural world,” Graham wrote in another story for Outside, “Out There, Nobody Can Hear You Scream,” published a year after her residency. “I wanted to talk about the enigmatic Walker sisters, the park’s brook trout restoration efforts, and the groundbreaking agreement that the National Park Service reached with the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians about their right to sustainably harvest the edible sochan plant on their ancestral lands.”

Graham said her Blackness and her natural curiosity about the Black people living in the region were not at the front of her mind when she arrived to stay in the park. “I naively figured I would learn about them in the historical panels of



Latria Graham’s article for Outside, “We’re Here. You Just Don’t See Us,” established her as a spokeswoman for diversity, equity and inclusion in the outdoors. COURTESY OF GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS ASSOCIATION

the visitor centers along with the former white inhabitants and the Cherokee.”

What Graham didn’t know yet was that the Smokies was just embarking on its own efforts to learn about the African American people who lived on the land before it became a park in the 1930s.

Not long after she arrived, Graham became interested in the story of Sook Turner and her family, African Americans who are buried in the Meigs Mountain area. “I wanted to know how they got here, how they survived, and ultimately where their descendants wound up.”

Three weeks into her residency, she made an early afternoon visit to the national park archives to learn what information was available on Black people. She left with one sheet of paper—a slave schedule that listed the age, sex, and race (“black” or “mulatto”) of bodies held in captivity. “There were no names. There were no pictures. There was nothing.”

Adding to this disappointment, Graham had a less-than-welcoming experience in one area of the park, which she writes about in “Out There, Nobody Can

Hear You Scream.” Yet, all in all, largely due to her own resilience and networking, she has made the Smokies her own.

“I relish the moments right before sunrise up at Purchase Knob in the North Carolina section of the Smokies,” she said. “The world is quiet, my mind is still, and the birds, chattering to one another, do not mind my presence. I believe this is what Eden must have been like.”

In an interview to appear in the spring 2021 edition of Smokies Life magazine with an excerpt from “Out There, Nobody Can Hear You Scream,” Graham said, “There are so many phenomena that I haven’t seen in the Smokies. I want to see more; I want to do more. Curiosity and discovery keep me coming back.”

Graham also said she is happy that the pandemic is “forcing us all outside. I’m seeing more people of color on the trails. It’s great to see that we’ve moved forward at warp speed in some way, but is this something that we’re going to do for a year, or are we going to continually engage these communities? Much of it remains to be seen.”

By the end of 2020, Great Smoky Mountains Association had contributed nearly \$70,000 to fund research efforts to begin telling the stories of the Black people who lived in the Smokies. As a result, the park and those who love it are beginning to better understand the complex history of the African American experience here.

Graham recently learned that “Out There, Nobody Can Hear You Scream” has been named a finalist for the 2021 Phillip D. Reed Environmental Writing Award and will be a featured story in “Best American Travel Writing 2021” and “Best American Science and Nature Writing 2021.” Find the full article at OutsideOnline.com.

Frances Figart is the editor of Smokies Life and the Creative Services Director for the 34,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. She coordinates the Steve Kemp Writers Residency, which was cancelled for 2020 and 2021 due to COVID-19 safety. Learn more at smokiesinformation.org and reach her at frances@gsmassoc.org.

NC judge keeps in place Medicaid managed care awards

ASSOCIATED PRESS

RALEIGH — A trial court judge said Thursday that he’ll leave in place another judge’s decision that rejected arguments from an unsuccessful bidder for North Carolina’s upcoming managed-care initiative for Medicaid.

Wake Superior Court Judge Michael O’Foghludha said at the close of online arguments that he would uphold an administrative law judge’s previous decision affirming how the Department of Health and Human Services conducted the process that led to contract awards

in 2019.

Four conventional insurers and one physician partnership received the awards, for which the cumulative contract values could reach \$6 billion annually. After many delays, the managed-care program is supposed to go live in July, covering 1.6 million Medicaid consumers.

The group “My Health by Health Providers” — composed of 12 local hospital systems and a New Mexico-based insurer — contends the DHHS process was flawed and biased against provider-led organizations like My Health. The group

also said conflicts of interest were present.

Other losing bidders also formally opposed the DHHS decision.

O’Foghludha, who plans to sign a formal order later, said from the bench that Administrative Law Judge Tenisha Jacobs correctly followed the proper standards in examining whether how DHHS gave the awards substantially prejudiced My Health.

O’Foghludha suggested a further appeal by the losing side may be ahead: “I’m certain that my word is not going to be the final word on this.”

My Health CEO Lisa Farrell said late Thursday the group still believes the General Assembly, which first approved the Medicaid managed care in 2015, intended for all North Carolinians to have the choice “to have their health care managed by provider-led entities led by North Carolina health care providers — not only large commercial insurers.”

Under managed care, the state Medicaid program will move from a traditional fee-for-service model to one in which organizations receive fixed monthly payments for every patient its providers see and treat.

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