

# MOUNTAINS

## Saving our Smokies by picking up one piece of litter at a time



### Word from the Smokies

Frances Figart  
Columnist

How many pieces of litter or trash do you pick up in a day? A week? A month? Imagine having organized 15 whole litter cleanup days involving large groups of people in 2021 thus far.

That's what Jerry and Darlene Willis have done. Based in west Knoxville, the pair is saving Great Smoky Mountains National Park, one piece of litter at a time. They hold a cleanup every month — weather permitting — in different parts of the park like Clingmans Dome Road, the Foothills Parkway, or along the "Spur" between Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge, Tennessee.

Jerry grew up in South Georgia and spent many summers in East Tennessee visiting family. Darlene grew up in Walland, Tennessee, right next to the park, where the couple lived for a time. They don't mind "talking trash" when it helps GSMNP.

"We focus on litter as well as other negative impacts of growing visitation like graffiti," said Jerry who, as founder and president of Save Our Smokies (S.O.S.), has formed partnerships with other park gateway communities addressing litter, among them Keep Sevier Beautiful and Keep Blount Beautiful.

Park visitation reached a record-breaking 12.5 million in 2019, and even during the pandemic, the numbers for 2020 reached 12 million. Caring for and sharing some of our nation's best treasures with this many people means that litter removal is vital to the ecological health and beauty of Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

"It's a rewarding and important stewardship option that anyone, of any age, can assist with," said Sheridan Roberts, parkwide volunteer coordinator. "With the onset of COVID, many frontline volunteers chose to step away from indoor, highly interactive work with visitors. But as time went on and they wanted to get back to work, we introduced a new Parkwide Litter Patrol Program. This allowed experienced, long-time volunteers to safely step back into stewardship."

Litter Patrol volunteers work independently and in pairs to monitor and remove trash from high-visit sites like trails, waterfalls, overlooks, and historic structures. Because they are at outdoor worksites and set their own schedules, these vital helpers don't necessarily have to work at crowded times or be close to visitors.

Since 2015, the park has hosted well over 26,000 Litter Patrol volunteers, including individuals and groups. Churches, schools, summer camps, Scouts, 4-H Clubs, college students, senior citizen groups, and local businesses have all participated, Roberts said.

Roberts first connected with the Willises on a cleanup at Fontana Lake last year. Jerry and Darlene spoke of their history and desire to do more to support the park. Roberts followed up, and S.O.S. has become a key partner in addressing the challenge of litter removal in and around the Smokies.

"To date, at least 265 Save Our Smokies Volunteers have dedicated 1,343 energetic hours to litter removal," she said. "They've identified trash pile-up in less-visited sections of the park, where it goes unseen. They've removed dryers,



Jerry and Darlene Willis are saving Great Smoky Mountains National Park, one piece of litter at a time. Jerry is founder and president of Save Our Smokies, one of many groups that work together as Litter Patrol volunteers.

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY JERRY AND DARLENE WILLIS



Alex García, Appalachian Trail Conservancy LatinX Hikers Partnership coordinator, volunteers on a May 15 cleanup on Clingmans Dome Road.

mattresses, garbage cans, tires. ... This group is extremely well-organized and has even brought their own signage and safety equipment."

A couple of years ago, Jerry and Darlene became members of the 900-mile club, meaning they have now hiked all the park's trails. That designation served to inspire their stewardship commitment.

"Each time we would finish a trail, there was such a sense of accomplishment as well as rejuvenation for my soul," Darlene recalled. "To be able to give back to the park that really has given so much to me is very humbling. We have a lot of hikers as volunteers, and that camaraderie, sharing a common goal, is huge."

Litter Patrol volunteerism ties in well with the park's focus on educating visitors in Leave No Trace practices. NPS maintains bear-resistant dumpsters at campgrounds and picnic areas where visitors are expected to have food waste. Food scraps and garbage can attract bears and other wildlife near roadways, trailheads, and other developed areas. To reduce this risk, trash receptacles are limited in these areas and visitors are

expected to pack out any trash from their vehicles or packs. It doesn't always happen.

"By removing litter and graffiti, volunteers can directly help the National Park Service preserve and protect the natural and cultural resources that have been entrusted to us all," Jerry said. "It's an amazing feeling to see an area that's been littered and, after you finish, it's clean and beautiful again."

Sadly, he said, these areas don't remain clean for the long-term.

"Hopefully as more visitors see us out there picking up the litter, more will get involved in cleanups," said Jerry. "And the biggest hope is that someone who litters will see our hard work and think about it before throwing trash down again."

*Frances Figart is the editor of Smokies Life magazine and the Creative Services Director for the 28,000-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.*

## Video sparks Flex Fitness backlash

Rebecca Walter

Hendersonville Times-News  
USA TODAY NETWORK

A Hispanic woman says a white gym owner upset about her family playing Mexican songs in a pool area disconnected their music and asked them to leave, leading to a visit from police in a filmed incident that is now being shared across the country.

A video of the incident at the Flex Fitness and Recreation Center pool in Hendersonville has thousands of views on the social media platform TikTok, and has been shared widely on Facebook.

On July 12, Veronica Ramirez, along with her children and friends, visited the pool, which is next door to where Ramirez teaches Zumba. The group played Mexican music, which they said was disconnected by the owner of the business after a customer complained, according to a GoFundMe fundraising page set up for Ramirez.

The Henderson County Sheriff's Office was contacted and deputies responded to the center at 1268 N. Allen Road. The disturbance was described as "persons refusing to leave the pool area after being asked to do so by management," according to Public Information Officer Johnny Duncan.

"Officers with the Henderson County Sheriff's Office responded to the business and upon arrival the disturbance had ended and the persons in question were preparing to leave the property," Duncan said in an email to the Times-News.

"All persons involved in the incident were very cooperative with law enforcement and no police action was taken or necessary."

The GoFundMe account says Ramirez, who rents her space from Flex Fitness to host Zumba classes, arrived July 13 to find an eviction notice taped to the door.

The goal of the GoFundMe campaign is to "accomplish equality in Henderson County and all surrounding areas that happen to come across this page," according to the fundraiser description. "As well as to provide the funds necessary for representation and relocation in this matter."

As of 6:30 p.m. Wednesday, more than 490 people had donated, raising over \$10,500. The fundraising goal is \$20,000.

Calls to Flex Fitness on July 14 were met with a message that the number was not available, and the caller was unable to leave a message. Emails to Flex Fitness were not returned as of the evening of July 14.

The business's Facebook page is no longer available, and its Google page says the gym is temporarily closed.

### Backlash against Flex Fitness

A flood of negative reviews has been posted for Flex Fitness on multiple platforms online over the last 24 hours.

A "public attention" alert pops up when visiting the Yelp page for Flex Fitness.

"This business recently received increased public attention resulting in an influx of people posting their views to this page, so we have temporarily disabled the ability to post here as we work to investigate the content," the alert says.

Hundreds of one-star Google reviews mentioning the encounter have also been left for Flex Fitness.

## Citizen Times

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

### Customer service

To view important information related to your subscription, visit [aboutyoursubscription.citizen-times.com](http://aboutyoursubscription.citizen-times.com). You can also manage your subscription at [account.citizen-times.com](http://account.citizen-times.com). Contact the Citizen Times for questions or to report issues via email at [citizentimes@gannett.com](mailto:citizentimes@gannett.com) or 1-800-672-2472.

### Operating hours are:

Monday-Friday: 8:00 a.m.-7:00 p.m.  
Saturday: 7:00 a.m.-11:00 a.m. for technical support only  
Sunday & holidays: 7:00 a.m.-11:00 a.m.

### Full access subscriptions

Subscribe and save today by visiting [citizen-times.com/subscribe](http://citizen-times.com/subscribe). Subscriptions below are billed per month and include access to [citizen-times.com](http://citizen-times.com), tablet and smartphone apps, and the e-Edition, a digital replica of the print edition.  
 ■ Delivery of the Monday through Sunday print editions: \$68.00\*  
 ■ Delivery of the Friday through Sunday print editions: \$39.00\*  
 ■ Delivery of the Sunday and Wednesday print editions: \$32.00\*  
 ■ Delivery of the Sunday print editions: \$25.00\*  
 \*Plus applicable taxes

### Corrections and clarifications

Our goal is to promptly correct errors. Email us at [accuracy@asheville.gannett.com](mailto:accuracy@asheville.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.

### Contact us

Customer Service ..... 1-800-672-2472  
 News Director ..... Jewell Walston | 828-232-5829  
 Advertising ..... 828-252-5611  
 Obituaries ..... 828-232-5966

### Postal information

Citizen Times, USPS #236-000, ISSN #0336-0000, is published Monday through Sunday at 14 O. Henry Ave., Asheville, NC 28802. Periodicals postage paid at Asheville, NC 28802.  
 Postmaster: Send address changes to Customer Service, PO Box 62670, San Angelo, TX 76906.