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ACCESSIBLE ADVENTURE



Great Smoky Mountains National Park Park Ranger Katie Corrigan helps Carly Peterson, ADA coordinator for Knox County and volunteer for Catalyst Sports, navigate a creek crossing on Cooper Road Trail.

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY JIM MATHENY/FRIENDS OF THE SMOKIES

Park program welcomes people with disabilities



Word from the Smokies
Holly Kays
Asheville Citizen Times

Growing up, Blount County native Carly Pearson considered time outdoors a way of life. When she wasn't exploring the stunningly diverse landscape of nearby Great Smoky Mountains National Park, she was giving it her all on the soccer field. In adulthood, she became a wildland firefighter for the National Park Service.

Then, in 2002, she suffered a line-of-duty spinal cord injury while deployed in Oregon. Ever since, Pearson has been paralyzed from the waist down.

"One of the harder parts of that injury for me was that, after having children, I couldn't share my enjoyment of nature with them in the same way that I experienced it growing up," said Pearson, who now serves as ADA coordinator for Knox County, Tennessee, and volunteers with



A mix between a manual wheelchair and a mountain bike, the park's GRIT Freedom Chairs feature a third wheel in front for stabilization. Users can propel themselves by pumping the hand levers, or they can receive a push from behind.

Catalyst Sports, a nonprofit dedicated to providing recreational opportunities for people with physical disabilities. "For 20 years, almost, I didn't really go to the park that much, because it frustrated me to not be able to get past the overlook."

Now, a partnership between the park, Catalyst and Knox County is making the Smokies more accessible than it's ever

been before. Whether by participating in a menu of free ranger programs or taking a hike using one of the park's new, reservable, off-road wheelchairs, people with disabilities can keep exploring after the pavement ends.

Leading the effort is Park Ranger Katie Corrigan, who started investigating options for accessible backcountry adventure after a 2019 encounter with a pair of veterans in the park's Cosby area. They wanted to know what opportunities were available for them in the Smokies, given their physical disabilities. Coming shortly after Corrigan's father had suffered a stroke, the conversation struck a personal chord.

Corrigan began investigating the possibilities. The first step, she learned, was to measure the trails for key metrics like width, incline, and obstacles so people with disabilities could make informed decisions about where to go. Smokies staff spent more than 150 hours over two months conducting site visits to assess the park's trails.

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Buncombe GOP chair won't be removed

Brown guilty of school board member assault

Joel Burgess
Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

The Buncombe County Republican chair won't be removed from his position after being found guilty of assaulting a GOP school board member.

County party Chair Doug Brown was found guilty July 8 of misdemeanor assault on a female in Buncombe County District Court. The trial came after county school board member Amy Churchill said Brown last year pushed her forcefully and then laid his hands on her again after she told him not to. The judge said lack of witnesses made the question of whether Brown pushed Churchill "debatable" but that witnesses and even Brown said he put his hands on her in the second encounter. In the sentencing, the judge gave a prayer for judgment, a type of judicial action carrying no punishment.

The Henderson County GOP chair was also accused of assaulting a female party official, but prosecutors dropped the charge June 12.

See BROWN, Page 6A



GOP Chair Doug Brown is surrounded by supporters after being found guilty of assault on a female at the Buncombe County Courthouse on July 8. ANGELA WILHELM/CITIZEN TIMES

Global technology outage affecting many sectors

Disruption grounds flights, hits banks and media businesses

Kim Hjelmgard and Christopher Cann
USA TODAY

LONDON - A major technology outage grounded flights, disrupted bank operations, delayed public transit systems and forced hospitals to cancel elective surgeries around the globe Friday in an incident a cybersecurity firm blamed on a faulty system update.

CrowdStrike, a U.S. firm that advertises being used by over half of Fortune

500 companies, said one of its recent content updates had a defect that impacted Microsoft's Windows operating system, adding the incident was "not a security incident or cyberattack."

"The issue has been identified, isolated and a fix has been deployed," said a statement from CrowdStrike.

The company's CEO, George Kurtz, apologized for the disruptions in an interview with NBC's "Today."

"We're deeply sorry for the impact that we've cost to customers, to travelers, to anyone affected by this including our company," Kurtz said.

"The system was sent an update, and that update had a software bug in it,"

Kurtz continued. "We identified this very quickly and remediated the issue. And as system comes back online, as they're re-booted, they're coming up and they're working."

Microsoft, meanwhile, said "the underlying cause has been fixed," but residual impacts would affect some of its Microsoft 365 apps and services.

Outages ripple far and wide

From the United Kingdom to Singapore, the effects of the software glitch were far-reaching on Friday.

See OUTAGE, Page 6A



Travelers line up at Milwaukee General Mitchell International Airport on Friday morning after several U.S. carriers issued ground stops for all their flights early Friday due to communication problems. ANDRES STAFF/REUTERS



Program

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Then, in 2023, the park received a grant from the National Environmental Education Foundation that allowed it to purchase two GRIT Freedom Chairs, capable of crossing streams and navigating rocks and roots, and to partner with Catalyst Sports and Knox County to offer three adaptive hikes and one biking excursion. The adventures drew a total of 220 people, including 44 people using adaptive technologies.

"I never knew my park service career would go in this direction, but I'm really honored to be part of this program," said Corrigan, adding that she's "never had a more rewarding experience."

Last year's success paved the way for more funding and expanded offerings in 2024. This summer, with support from Friends of the Smokies and Kampgrounds of America Foundation, the park offered a hike and boat tour at Hazel Creek, a kayaking experience on Fontana Lake, and an overnight backcountry adventure at Abrams Creek. Two hikes and two biking trips are scheduled for the fall, with each activity offered twice on the scheduled day.

Since her injury, Pearson has found many ways to be active again, competing nationally in paracycling, para-triathlon, and paraclimbing events and winning multiple championships. In 2019, she did nearly 70 miles of the Camino de Santiago in Spain using an off-road wheelchair. Now, she considers it a joy to leverage her 22 years of wheelchair experience to help ensure adaptive program participants are comfortable and confident on the trail.

"I'm just so happy to help other people, because someone helped me early on in my recreational endeavors and my sports endeavors and showed me that life wasn't over," she said. "I just had to figure out a way to adapt and work around some of the barriers. And for me, the satisfaction is that I'm able to help other people get out there and participate."

For many participants, the experience has been transformational. Pearson recalls one woman, an avid hiker before suffering a stroke, who cried "happy tears" for most of one hiking program, so ecstatic was she to be out in



Participants in a fall 2023 hike to Tom Branch Falls in the park's Deep Creek area gather for a group photo. In 2023, a total of 220 people, of whom 44 used adaptive technologies, participated in the adaptive program. PROVIDED BY CATALYST SPORTS



ABOVE, LEFT: From left, ADA coordinator for Knox County and volunteer for Catalyst Sports Carly Pearson, program participant Cecil Williams, and Park Ranger Katie Corrigan smile during an adaptive outing at Hazel Creek. ABOVE, RIGHT: An adaptive program participant enjoys a hike using an all-terrain wheelchair during a July 14 outing on Hazel Creek Trail. GRIT Freedom Chairs feature hand levers that users can push to propel themselves down the trail. PROVIDED BY JIM MATHENY/FRIENDS OF THE SMOKIES

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Program

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the woods again. Another woman, a mother of twin girls, glowed as her children ran circles around her while they hiked together along a river. The experience was a “dream come true” she’d thought to be impossible.

“As parents of a disabled young adult,” one family wrote, “this gives us hope that things are finally changing for the better.”

Ranger-led outings fill up fast, but wheelchair users can explore the park anytime by reserving one of the four GRIT Freedom Chairs the park now owns, thanks to support from the same organizations that funded the programming. The chairs are available Mondays and Tuesdays at Sugarlands Visitor Center on a first-come, first-served basis, and they’re reservable online Wednesday through Sunday. Users must register at least three business days in advance and can do so up to 30 days ahead of time. After registration, a staff member will reach out to verify the chairs meet the person’s needs and abilities. Then, a volunteer will be assigned to meet at the chosen trail, ensuring the person is comfortable with the equipment before embarking. Wheelchair users can bring their own trail buddy or hike with the volunteer.

Currently, the chairs can be used on Gatlinburg Trail, the first 2.4 miles of Little River Trail, the back route to Cataract Falls, Sugarlands Valley Nature Trail, Bradley Fork Trail, Oconaluftee River Trail, Deep Creek Trail to Indian Creek Falls, Middle Prong Trail, John Oliver Trail, Elijah Oliver Trail, and the areas around Sugarlands, Oconaluftee and Cades Cove visitor centers. The park service is working to expand that list.

“We want the public to understand that Great Smoky Mountains National Park is a place for all people, including people with mobility needs,” said Corrigan. “We are striving to be an inclusive outdoor community where everyone can enjoy the outdoors with their friends and family.”

The Smokies is leading the way in these efforts, but it is not alone. State park systems in both Tennessee and North Carolina offer a range of accessible features, including accessible hiking and kayaking programs in multiple



Program participant Matthew Shelton, right, uses an adaptive kayak with his mother, Sharon Shelton, on Fontana Lake during a group outing in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY CATALYST SPORTS



Katie Corrigan checks in with a program participant during a hike and boat tour at Hazel Creek this month. PROVIDED BY JIM MATHENY/FRIENDS OF THE SMOKIES

North Carolina parks and reservable all-terrain wheelchairs at 22 Tennessee state parks. Catalyst recently applied

for a grant from the National Forest Community Recreation Fund that would fund an adaptive recreation

event in the Pisgah National Forest, as well as data collection and trail accessibility inventory. Several other national parks also offer all-terrain wheelchairs, though not ranger programs like those in the Smokies.

“We opened a door that isn’t going to close behind us,” said Pearson. “That’s my hope at least.”

To register for upcoming adaptive programs or reserve a hiking chair, visit catalystsports.org/great-smoky-mountain-adaptive-hike-bike. To volunteer with the program, send an email using the form at nps.gov/grsm/contacts.htm. For trail accessibility information, visit nps.gov/grsm/planyourvisit/trail-access-information.htm.

Holly Kays is the lead writer for the 29,000-member Smokies Life, a non-profit dedicated to supporting the scientific, historical, and interpretive activities of Great Smoky Mountains National Park by providing educational products and services such as this column. Learn more at SmokiesLife.org or reach the author at hollyk@smokieslife.org.



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