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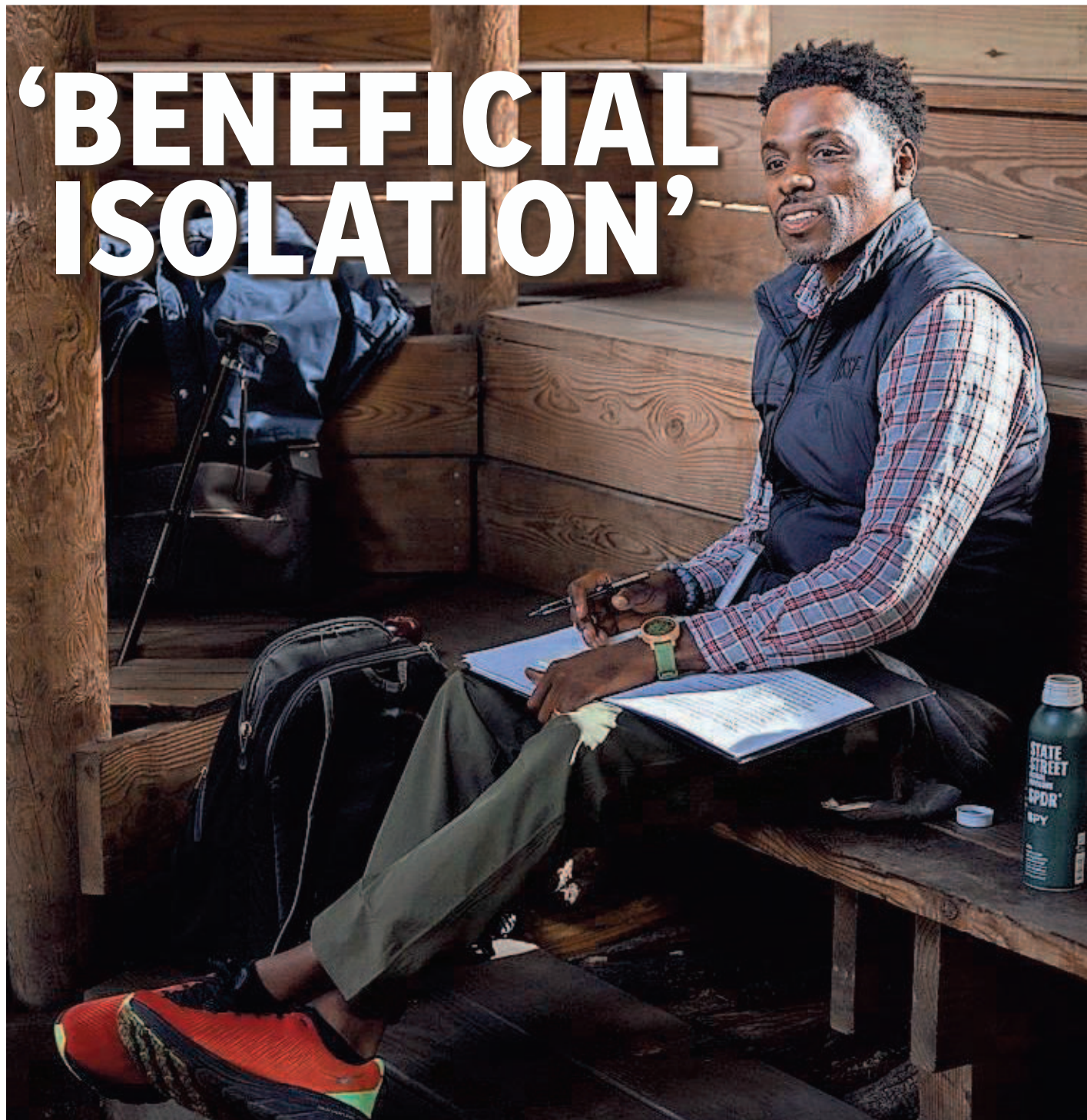
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Daron K. Roberts takes in the setting during his introduction to the Smokies at the 2023 Tremont Writers Conference in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. PROVIDED BY MICHELE SONS

Residency in Smokies sparks creativity for writer



Word from the Smokies
Holly Kays
Asheville Citizen Times

When Daron K. Roberts' high school teacher pulled him aside to share her vision for his future as a writer, the four-time class president brushed the comment aside. He knew he'd be going into politics, and that's all there was to it.

But two decades later, her words came back to him as he sat at home during the 2020 pandemic lockdown, thumbing through the books he'd read over the past years. Unlike in the non-fiction volumes, the margins of every fiction book were filled with notes. At the time, Roberts was already the author of two nonfiction titles, but he realized then that he had a love for fiction that he had yet to tap. This epiphany sent him on a journey that led straight to Great Smoky Mountains National Park. In 2023, he attended the inaugural Tremont Writers Conference, and months later he was selected as the 2024 Steve Kemp Writer in Residence.

"I've written on beaches, I've written in deserts, I've written in rural places, but there's just something really special about the Smokies — and not just for me, but for anyone," he said. "I just be-



Park Librarian-Archivist Michael Aday (right) offered 2024 Steve Kemp Writer in Residence Daron K. Roberts critical assistance in accessing park records related to Roberts' work-in-progress dealing with Job Corps workers during the 1960s. PROVIDED BY DARON K. ROBERTS

lieve that the setting brings the best creative talent to the forefront. My time there was really special."

Roberts is still early in his fiction writing career, but he's no stranger to trying new things. He was a student at Harvard Law School, where he graduated in 2007, when an experience volunteering at a summer football camp led him to refocus his efforts on becoming an NFL football coach. Since then, he's

coached for three NFL teams and one college team, launched a nonprofit football camp, founded the Center for Sports Leadership and Innovation at his alma mater the University of Texas, and published three nonfiction books. He's meeting this new chapter with an enthusiasm buoyed by his experiences in the Great Smoky Mountains.

See **WRITER**, Page 4A

Asheville adopts 10-year Parks and Rec plan

Sarah Honosky
Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE - The city adopted a new 10-year plan for Parks and Recreation Aug. 27 with the aim to build and preserve recreation citywide, and priorities that include new aquatics facilities and dedicated pickleball courts.

"We are thrilled with this roadmap that will help plan, build, and maintain public spaces in smarter and more beneficial ways," Parks and Recreation Director D. Tyrell McGirt said in an August news release.

Top of the list in the plan, among Phase 1 project priorities, are two new major facilities — a pickleball complex, with eight to 10 courts; and an aquatic facility — plus reinvesting in six system parks and two community centers, addressing deferred maintenance and the development of a recently acquired property on Sweeten Creek Road.

Investment zones are identified based on geographic areas with the most needs based on factors such as equity, current condition, size, people served and park experiences.

See **PARKS**, Page 5A

Report: US citizen killed during West Bank protest

12 killed in strikes across Gaza Strip

REUTERS

RAMALLAH, West Bank - A U.S. citizen taking part in a protest against settlement expansion in the occupied West Bank died of her wounds on Friday after being shot in the head by Israeli troops, the official Palestinian news agency Wafa reported.

The Israeli military said it was looking into the report. There was no immediate comment from the U.S. embassy.

Fouad Nafaa, the head of the Rafidia Hospital in Nablus, told Reuters the woman arrived at the hospital in a very critical condition, with a serious head injury.

"We tried to perform a resuscitation operation on her, but unfortunately she died," he said.

See **PROTEST**, Page 6A



Writer

Continued from Page 1A

For Roberts, a Texas native, the 2023 Tremont Writers Conference served as his introduction to the Smokies. But it also introduced him to a group of other writers who have since become close friends, consistently sharing critiques and encouragement. The conference “created a new writing life in me,” he said, and the Steve Kemp Writers Residency that followed in 2024 was “a life-changing experience.”

Offered annually since 2019, the residency allows one chosen writer to spend six weeks living in the Smokies, focusing on their craft in a retreat-like setting. Writers use this time to develop new work, and they are also given the opportunity to engage with the public through outreach activities and to spend time with the residency’s namesake, Steve Kemp, who retired in 2017 as interpretive products and services director following

a 30-year career with Smokies Life. Roberts, who has a wife and five kids at home in Austin, divided his residency into two three-week chunks, one in March and the other in July. During each stay, his days fell into a peaceful rhythm. Every morning, he’d wake up around 5:30 a.m. and sit on the patio to watch the sun rise and the fog lift in the distance while he jotted down his thoughts and ideas for the day’s writing. Then he’d go on a hike, returning to the cabin by 9:30 a.m. to start writing. After lunch, he’d continue writing and researching through dinnertime. When asked to elaborate on the “life-changing” nature of the experience, Robert said it’s been difficult to find concrete language to define it.

“I can’t identify another setting, of the places that I’ve been to on the planet, that rivals the Smokies in terms of serenity,” he said. “There’s something magical about the way that it sparks curiosity and creativity.”

The setting alone, he said, makes the residency “one of the best in the country.” The time he spent with Kemp learning about the park and the help he received from Michael Aday, the park’s librarian and archivist, in researching his work-in-progress about 1960s Job Corps workers assigned to Great Smoky Mountains National Park, put the experience over the top.

Aday helped Roberts examine the multitude of records available from that period. During his time in the park, Roberts also worked on editing his third non-fiction title, “Microwins,” and on expanding the short story he’d submitted for the Tremont Writers Conference into a novel. He’s continuing to research the Job Corps story, tracking down and interviewing people with memories from the era as he works toward starting the writing phase of the project.

With applications now being accepted for the 2025 residency, Roberts encourages any writer who takes the craft seriously to consider applying.

“There’s so much peace there that I think it’s very difficult to not find your creative mojo by being in the Smokies for a certain period of time,” he said. “It’s almost like a beneficial isolation. I think for a writer, being isolated in the Smokies just gives a person surface area on which to become the best writer they can be.”

Holly Kays is the lead writer for the 29,000-member Smokies Life, a nonprofit dedicated to supporting the scientific, historical, and interpretive activities of



Daron K. Roberts (right) talks with poetry cohort leader Frank X. Walker during the inaugural Tremont Writers Conference in 2023. PROVIDED BY MICHELE SONS



The 2024 Steve Kemp Writer in Residence Daron K. Roberts (right) stands with the residency’s namesake, who served as interpretive products and services director for Smokies Life until his retirement in 2017. PROVIDED BY DARON K. ROBERTS



With help from the park’s librarian-archivist Michael Aday, Daron K. Roberts spent hours during his residency poring over park records related to his current work-in-progress, focused on Job Corps workers in Great Smoky Mountains National Park during the 1960s. PROVIDED BY DARON K. ROBERTS

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. Applications for the 2025 Steve Kemp Writers Residency

will be accepted through Nov. 1. Applicants must be 18 or older, and prior knowledge of the Smokies is not a prerequisite for consideration. Learn more at smokieslife.org/the-steve-kemp-writers-residency.

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