

MOUNTAINS

Smokies Life CEO Laurel Rematore retires



Word from the Smokies
Holly Kays
Guest Columnist

When Laurel Rematore announced she was moving to the Great Smoky Mountains, Denise Matsuoka was shocked. Matsuoka, Rematore's close friend since high school, remembered how Rematore had described the Smokies when she'd visited a couple of years earlier.

"She said, 'It's the most humid place I've ever been. It's like being in a shower,'" Matsuoka recalled. Rematore summarizes her conclusions similarly: "I thought people who live here were insane, because it is so moist." Though the fireflies were "magical," after experiencing "thunder, lightning, and crazy rain," she was glad to return to the dry, dry Southwest.

But then in 2015, Terry Maddox announced his retirement as executive director of Great Smoky Mountains Association. For the first time in 26 years, the cooperating association for the nation's most visited national park was hiring someone new to fill its top leadership position. Rematore knew Steve Kemp, the nonprofit's interpretive products and services director, and he called to ask if she planned to apply. At first, she laughed. Then, she realized she was facing a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Now, after nearly nine years in the Smokies that culminated with the organization's rebranding as Smokies Life, Rematore is ready to retire.

Back in high school, Matsuoka figured Rematore's future would have something to do with writing. Her friend always had a way with words, but then Rematore "happened into" a job with Lockheed Martin Corporation, headquartered about 10 miles from her hometown of San Jose, California. She stayed with the company for 16 years, first on the engineering side of the house, and then in human resources.

She enjoyed the work, but as she neared 40, Rematore started to take a hard look at her life. She wanted to leave a legacy driven by passion — and the thing she was most passionate about, she realized, was parks. In particular, Yosemite National Park. She, Matsuoka, and other high school classmates had completed the spring break Yosemite

Institute Program there in 1976 and 1977. "I think I just imprinted on that park," Rematore said. "It became my place."

When a membership director position opened up at the Yosemite Association in 2001, she was swift to apply — even though accepting meant taking a 60% pay cut and moving to the Sierra Nevada Mountains. She spent an "amazing" eight years in Yosemite, leaving in 2008 to continue her new career path as executive director of the Mesa Verde Association in southwestern Colorado. Entrusted with a staff of 25, there she "learned the ropes" of leading a nonprofit.

Love of the national parks drew Rematore to her new career, but the collaborative culture pervading the community of public lands nonprofits kept her there. The nationwide network of organizations, which openly exchanged ideas and insights, was a far cry from the insular world of defense and high-tech industry from which she'd come. There, the paramount concerns had been protecting competitive advantage and shareholder value while preventing industrial espionage.

"When I found my new career path, I was delighted to learn that we could freely share our lessons learned, our experiences, and lift up our fellow nonprofits as well as our agency partners, since we were all working toward a common goal to protect and preserve public lands," she said. "It was such a breath of fresh air for this Silicon Valley native."

Upon her January 2016 arrival in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, Rematore adopted two mantras for her new job: everything is bigger in the Smokies, and everything is more complicated in the Smokies. At that time, visitation to Great Smoky Mountains National Park was nearly 20 times higher than at Mesa Verde, and Rematore's staff was four times as large.

"The first day was lovely. Everybody was really nice," Rematore said. "And then on the second day, in the afternoon, all the staff directors started beating a path to my door."

She fielded a flood of questions, complaints and requests; six weeks later, she had to deal with the fallout of a major cybersecurity breach. That fall, the Chimney Tops 2 Fire tore through the park and into Gatlinburg. And in early 2017, Kemp, a key employee in the organization, announced his intention to retire.

"It was zero to 60," Rematore said. As she worked to get her feet on the ground,



Laurel Rematore has served as CEO of Smokies Life since January 2016 and retires from that role this month.
PROVIDED BY QUINTIN ELLISON

Rematore developed a set of goals, many of which were financial. She wanted to pay off the organization's debts, including \$70,000 it owed for interest payments on the new Oconaluftee Visitor Center, and to stabilize its finances for the future: setting aside reserves for emergency expenses and aid-to-park payments, and building the Legacy Fund. She also wanted to develop a strategic plan to ensure the organization was operating efficiently and sustainably, with a resilient, forward-focused, results-oriented workplace. During Rematore's tenure, Smokies Life has accomplished those initial goals.

"We've been exceptionally successful at setting aside financial reserves," she said. "It's important when more than 90% of the organization's revenue comes from our retail operations, because if something happens to the retail machine — like a government shutdown or major road closure — you have to have something to fall back on."

Such a crisis unfolded in 2020, when the park — and the retail stores within it — closed for 46 days following the COVID-19 pandemic's arrival. The reserves Rematore had planned for allowed the organization to retain its staff and — thanks to the boom in visitation that followed the pandemic and the associated rebound in bookstore sales — to increase its financial commitments to NPS with each passing year. The Legacy Fund, which held \$275,000 when Rematore arrived, is now up to \$4.8 million, and Smokies Life has built numerous other reserve accounts to allow it to weather any future storms that may

arise.

"For me, the measure of success is whether we can be agile and responsive to the National Park Service's needs," Rematore said.

By bolstering its own sustainability, Smokies Life has been able to do just that. The nonprofit was integral to implementing the Park It Forward parking tag program and since January 2023 has been staffing the information desks at Sugarlands and Oconaluftee visitor centers. This frees up the park's resource education rangers to lead more interpretive programs and interact with visitors they encounter while they're out and about — spontaneous interactions that are often the highlight of a visitor's Smokies experience.

Rematore said she's proud of the work she's done to build the stable, efficient organization that new Smokies Life CEO Jacki Harp now inherits. As Smokies Life Board Chair Geoff Cantrell sees it, Rematore leaves the organization with a legacy of strength, determination and fulfillment that sets it up for a bright future in the years ahead. "Her impact has gone beyond Smokies Life and Great Smoky Mountains National Park to influence partnerships and gateway communities throughout the Southern Appalachians," said Cantrell. "She has had a real influence on so much, and has done it humbly and with enthusiasm."

Though Rematore is vacating the CEO's seat, she's not vacating the Smokies. Instead of returning to her native West Coast, she plans to spend her retirement in Gatlinburg, reading, hiking and enjoying the close circle of friends she's developed since moving to Tennessee in 2016.

"I always thought of this job as my moon shot," she said, referencing the famous quote from John F. Kennedy about choosing to do things, including going to the moon, "not because they are easy, but because they are hard," which she keeps pinned on the wall near her desk. "I just gave it my all, every bit of what I had, because I was never going to get this kind of an opportunity again."

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 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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