



ACC Basketball: UNC, NC State meet in rivalry game

SPORTS, 1B

SERVING ASHEVILLE SINCE 1870

CITIZEN TIMES

SATURDAY, JANUARY 11, 2025 | CITIZEN-TIMES.COM

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

WORD FROM THE SMOKIES



Jayne and Scott Young began their Volunteer in Parks career in 2017 when they signed up to become rovers at Clingmans Dome, now called Kuwohi. Since then, they have taken on a plethora of other volunteer roles. PROVIDED BY SCOTT AND JAYNE YOUNG

Volunteer roles critical to park operations



Word from the Smokies
Holly Kays
USA TODAY NETWORK

After years of vacationing in the Smokies, Scott and Jayne Young had no trouble deciding where they wanted to retire. In 2016, they sold their lake-side home in Ohio and moved to Gatlinburg.

"We always thought that if we ever got the chance to move here, we wanted to give back and help other people like the rangers helped us," Jayne said.

About a year after their move, the couple saw

their chance. They spotted a newspaper ad calling for volunteers to help interact with visitors at Kuwohi, then called Clingmans Dome. They began spending about five hours each week roving the trail, answering visitors' questions, and keeping their eyes open for anybody in need of help.

Seven years later, the couple has contributed more than 20,000 volunteer hours to the park, averaging 45-50 hours each week during the season. But the Youngs are used to managing an intense workload. Scott spent his career as a software installer and Jayne as a district training manager for a Fortune 500 company.

"It's a whole lot different when you're doing

See KAYS, Page 9A

Buncombe County's living wage rises after Helene

Jacob Biba
Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE – The hourly wage a single person working full-time needs to earn to rent a one-bedroom apartment in Buncombe County is now \$23.15 an hour, or more than \$48,000 annually, according to Just Economics of Western North Carolina, a nonprofit advocacy group.

Just Economics announced the new living wage rate Jan. 6. The new figure, which is calculated using a four-year rolling average of the fair market rent determined by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, is a nearly 5% increase from the 2024 living wage rate of \$22.10 an hour.

The increase comes despite projected one-bedroom rental costs dropping 10% to \$1,347 in 2025, down from \$1,496.

A new living wage figure for the region's rural areas will be announced in February. Just Economics uses federal poverty guidelines to determine the wage rate in those areas, it said.

The living wage increase also comes a little more than three months after Tropical Storm Helene devastated the region, killing more than 100 people and destroying and damaging many homes and businesses, putting thousands out of work.

See WAGE, Page 4A

Hiring closes out 2024 on high note

Health care, retail lead job growth

Paul Davidson
USA TODAY

U.S. employers added a booming 256,000 jobs in December, shrugging off high labor costs, slowing sales and uncertainty about President-elect Donald Trump's economic policies.

The unemployment rate fell from 4.2% to 4.1%, the Labor Department said Friday.

Economists surveyed by Bloomberg had estimated that about 165,000 jobs were added last month based on their median forecast.

Overall, employers added 2.2 million jobs in 2024, or an average of 186,000 a month. That's down from 3 million, or an average of 251,000 a month, in 2023, but still a surprisingly strong showing. Most forecasters

See HIRING, Page 8A



Kays

Continued from Page 1A

something because you want to do it, not because you have to do it," said Scott. "And since we don't do the same jobs every day, it's a totally different atmosphere than full-time work."

The Youngs are just two of the 1,624 people who gave their time as Volunteers in Park, called VIPs, between Oct. 1, 2023, and Sept. 30, 2024. These dedicated workers filled 2,677 volunteer positions and logged 113,448 service hours, equivalent to about 56 full-time, year-round positions and valued at nearly \$3.8 million. Many visitors are more likely to encounter a VIP than a National Park Service employee during their trip to the park — during peak season, the park has 10-12 VIPs on its roster for every one NPS employee.

Volunteer roles run the gamut of places and positions within America's most-visited national park. VIPs are stationed behind the desk at visitor centers in Sugarlands, Oconaluftee and Kuwohi, answering questions posed by travelers from all over the globe. They rove trails and historic buildings at Elkmont, Laurel Falls, Whiteoak Sinks, Mingus Mill and Cades Cove, greeting visitors and offering insight into the stories these places hold. They pick up litter, do trail work, protect elk, serve as campground hosts, maintain park facilities, collect data on water quality and wildflower bloom schedules, and perform countless other tasks.

"The overall visitor experience would really be diminished without volunteer positions," said Adam Monroe, the park's trails and facilities volunteer coordinator.

Most of the volunteers in the programs Monroe oversees don't often interact with visitors directly, but they uplift their Smokies experience nonetheless. Many visitors come to explore the park's 850-mile trail network, maintained by its two roving trail crews, one based in Tennessee and the other in North Carolina. These positions operate on a six-month season, but volunteers help the park keep its trails in shape all year round. Monroe manages several trail maintenance volunteer programs, including Wednesday volunteer days on Trails Forever projects and the Adopt-A-Trail program, one of the park's most



Volunteers use hand tools to improve a section of the nearly 900 miles of trail within Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY NATIONAL PARK SERVICE



Robert Triplett, a member of the Luftee Rover volunteer force that works to keep elk and people safe in the Oconaluftee area, speaks to a young visitor in August 2024.



Volunteer Joe Lovedahl gives park visitors insight into the history of Mingus Mill.

popular volunteer opportunities.

There are about 90 Adopt-a-Trail volunteers who hike their chosen trail at least four times each year, performing light trail maintenance work, like cutting back brambles and checking for hazards and blowdowns. The volunteer force allows the park to maintain its trail system year-round and multiplies the number of eyes and ears scoping out issues on the massive trail network.

Volunteers also contribute by performing less complex tasks, allowing paid crews to focus on jobs that require a higher skill level. For example, during the recently completed rehabilitation of Ramsey Cascades Trail, the NPS Trails Forever crew built steps, bridges, and drains, all jobs that require precision and experience to execute. But 110 volunteers worked more than 1,800 hours cutting back brush, picking up stones, and performing other tasks that other-

wise would have consumed the paid crew's valuable time.

"That really helps our paid staff home in on the more skilled jobs, like stone masonry, building out of native timber, things like that," Monroe said.

People of all ages and backgrounds contribute to the park's volunteer force, but "the continuum from visitor-in-park to Volunteer in Park is pretty deep," said Parkwide Volunteer Coordinator Sheridan Roberts. "People who start out as visitors to the Smokies often become our most committed volunteers."

That is certainly an accurate description of the Youngs, whose involvement with the VIP program grew quickly after that first foray at Kuwohi. When they heard a fellow volunteer, who also worked as a Laurel Falls Rover, say that he wouldn't be able to make his upcoming shift and had nobody to take his place, Scott and Jayne offered their help. Before long, they were regular ro-

ers there too. The Laurel Falls Rover program works out of the Sugarlands Visitor Center, the park's largest, and they soon got to know many other NPS rangers and the volunteer programs they oversee.

Today, Scott and Jayne work the visitor desk at Sugarlands every week from 9 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Sunday-Wednesday. They mingle with visitors as Elkmont rovers on Thursdays, work as volunteer program assistants on Fridays, and support any number of programs on Saturdays — Smokies Service Days, National Public Lands Day litter pickups, adaptive program outings, the annual Festival of Christmas Past, Present, and Future. For the past three years, they've also been entrusted with answering the flood of letters children mail to the park — 1,025 last year.

Not every volunteer contributes that number of hours, nor are they expected to. Many positions call for only one weekly four-hour shift a few months out of the year. Others, like the Adopt-a-Trail and water quality monitoring programs, require a handful of annual site visits that can be done on the volunteer's own schedule. Some people pitch in for just a few hours each year, participating in a litter pickup or Smokies Service Day during their visit to the park.

There are more than 30 different volunteer job descriptions, so if one job isn't a good fit, there are plenty more to try. Experienced VIPs are welcoming and ready to train new recruits, the Youngs said, and "you can't beat the 'office.'"

"We like to be challenged, and we like to keep learning," Jayne said. "There's always something new out there we can learn to do — a new craft or a new skill or knowledge. It gives us a reason to get up every morning and take better care of ourselves."

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.

For more information about volunteer opportunities in Great Smoky Mountains National Park, visit nps.gov/grsm/getinvolved/volunteer.htm.



New Year SALE




20% Thicker Aluminum

One-Piece System

Liquid Adhesion



16 YEARS STRAIGHT
THE GOOD HOUSEKEEPING SEAL OF APPROVAL

GUARD YOUR HOME FOR A LIFETIME!

- No Pest Parties
- No Clogging
- No Water Damage
- No Cleaning
- No Ladder Accidents

15% OFF

TOTAL PURCHASE*

OFFER ENDS 01/31/2025

\$50

VISA CARD

with your Leafguard purchase!**



AND 0% INTEREST

If Paid In Full Within 18 Months***



Leafguard

BY GREAT DAY IMPROVEMENTS

Call Now For Your FREE Estimate!

828.407.1249



SCAN ME FOR A FREE ESTIMATE

* Does not include cost of material. Offer ends 01/31/2025. **All participants who attend an estimated 60-90-minute in-home product consultation will receive a \$50 Visa gift card. Retail value is \$50. Offer sponsored by Leafguard Holdings Inc. Limit one per household. Company procures, sells, and installs seamless gutter protection. This offer is valid for homeowners over 18 years of age. If married or involved with a life partner, both cohabitating persons must attend and complete presentation together. Participants must have a photo ID and be legally able to enter into a contract. The following persons are not eligible for this offer: employees of Company or affiliated companies or entities, their immediate family members, previous participants in a Company in-home consultation within the past 12 months and all current and former Company customers. Gift may not be extended, transferred, or substituted except that Company may substitute a gift of equal or greater value if it deems it necessary. Gift card will be mailed to the participant via first class United States Mail within 10 days of receipt of the promotion form. Not valid in conjunction with any other promotion or discount of any kind. Offer not sponsored and is subject to change without notice prior to reservation. Offer not available in the states of CA, IN, PA and MI. *** Finance offer details can be found at leafguard.com/finance/disclaimer. Expires 01/31/2025.