



## UNC hopes to solve its road woes as the Tar Heels head to Syracuse

SPORTS, 1B

SERVING ASHEVILLE SINCE 1870

# CITIZEN TIMES

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 2025 | CITIZEN-TIMES.COM

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK



Members of the 2024 Tremont Writers Conference fiction cohort sit around a fire as they offer suggestions to improve each other's submitted pieces of writing. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY VALERIE POLK/SMOKIES LIFE

## Police ID human remains discovered by hiker

Ryley Ober  
Asheville Citizen Times  
USA TODAY NETWORK

The Cherokee County Sheriff's Office and the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation are searching for answers after human remains were discovered in a wooded area off Burrell Mountain near Murphy, officials said Feb. 12.

On Jan. 23, N.C. SBI contacted the Cherokee County Sheriff's Office after a hiker discovered a human skull, a news release from the sheriff's office said. Authorities searched the area on Jan. 27 and again on Feb. 4 with help from Western Carolina University anthropology students. During the second search, additional human remains were recovered, the release said.

Through extensive forensic investigation, the SBI identified the deceased as Kamron Peter Rondon, 35. He has not been reported missing to any law enforcement based on "available information," the release said.

As of Feb. 12, officials are unsure how Rondon died, and the sheriff's office is asking the public for any information that may help the ongoing investigation.

The Cherokee County Sheriff's Office "urges" anyone with information related to the case to contact the department at (828) 837-2589 during

See REMAINS, Page 3A

## Applications open for writing conference in Great Smokies



Word from the Smokies  
Holly Kays

Maurice Manning has led countless writing workshops over the course of his career, but the Pulitzer Prize-nominated poet experienced something special at the Tremont Writers Conference last October. The conference, now preparing for its third year, is jointly created and coordinated by Smokies Life and the Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont, and it takes place on Tremont's campus nestled inside Great Smoky Mountains National Park, just as the fall leaves near their peak.

"The thing that stands out to me about the Tremont conference is that the Great Smoky Mountains is not simply a setting for the program," Manning said. "It is an integrated feature of the program. I've long been a believer that the landscape, the natural surroundings, ought to be generative for one's writing, and Tremont's location makes that immensely possible."

Manning led the poetry cohort during the 2024 conference and enjoyed the experience so much he's filling the same role in 2025. This year's conference, slated for Oct. 22-26, is accepting applications from writers of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction through May 15.

Attendees will participate in small-group writing workshops led by Manning for poetry, fellow Kentuckian Crystal Wilkinson for nonfiction, and two cohort leaders for fiction: journalist-turned-novelist Karen Spears Zacharias and David Joy, a novelist whose work is firmly rooted in the mountains of Western North Carolina.

"It's a highlight of my year to help organize this conference, and I get just as



Faculty at the 2024 Tremont Writers Conference, from left, David Brill, Frank X Walker, Monic Ductan and Maurice Manning, answer questions from Tremont Manager of Field and College Programs Jeremy Lloyd at an evening program open to the public at Blount County Public Library.

much out of it as the participants," said Frances Figart, creative services director for Smokies Life, who creates each annual event in partnership with Tremont's manager of field and college programs Jeremy Lloyd. "I'm so thrilled that we have Maurice Manning returning, as he is just the epitome of a great teacher of poetry, with knowledge that easily extends to all genres. I also know it will be exhilarating to get to work with Wilkinson, Joy, and Zacharias for the first time."

In addition to daily morning workshops and optional one-on-one mentoring sessions with their cohort leaders, participating writers will spend their afternoons accompanying Tremont naturalists on excursions explor-

ing the region's cultural and natural history, and their evenings enjoying group dinners, fellowship, and readings from cohort leaders. The spirit of community pervading the conference is "everything," Manning said, the whole experience designed around the idea that everyone involved is working together toward the same goal — continual improvement of craft as they tweak lines and storylines "to where it's just right, like a bird building a nest."

Nature-based metaphors like this are easier to access when living life in close relationship to the complex and universal truths of the outdoors. Manning has published eight collections of

See CONFERENCE, Page 2A

## House budget panel OKs Trump agenda blueprint

Riley Beggin  
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — Less than three days ago, House Republicans were well past their self-imposed deadline to come up with a blueprint to pass President Donald Trump's agenda through Congress.

Now they have that plan, and they've passed it through a key committee. They appear to have secured the support of ultraconservative members who threatened to derail it.

Reps. Chip Roy, R-Texas, and Ralph Norman, R-S.C., spoke glowingly about the plan at a House Budget Committee hearing Thursday, where the plan advanced 21-16 with their support after they'd cast doubt on it Wednesday.

"The American people expect us to do our job, balance the budget and stop spending money we don't have," Roy said. "I'm proud of what the chairman has put forward. I believe that it is responsible."

See TRUMP, Page 3A



# MOUNTAINS

## Western NC's chief federal prosecutor last to resign under Trump

**Ryley Ober**

Asheville Citizen Times  
USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE - U.S. Attorney for the Western District of North Carolina Dena J. King announced her immediate resignation from her position as Western North Carolina's chief law enforcement officer on Wednesday, Feb. 12.

King is the last of the state's three U.S. Attorneys to announce their resignations on the heels of President Donald Trump's inauguration. He will appoint their successors. Two other two other federal prosecutors nominated by former President Joe Biden stepped down in January: Michael Easley Jr., and Sandra Hairston, who represented the Eastern District and Middle District, respectively.

"It has been a tremendous honor to serve the people of the Western District of North Carolina," King said in a news release. "I've had the privilege of working alongside some of the most talented

public servants who are dedicated to serving our communities with integrity, distinction, and excellence."

Biden nominated King in September 2021, and she was confirmed by the United States Senate shortly after. King was the first person of color to be appointed to the position in the Western District of North Carolina, which is based in Charlotte, the release said.

As part of her departure announcement, King highlighted her achievements as the region's U.S. Attorney, including the launch of the district's first ever Civil Rights Team, which focused on the enforcement of civil rights laws. She also restarted the Health Care Fraud Task Force, a multi-agency team of federal and state law enforcement agencies and regulatory bodies that work to uncover fraud within the health care system. The team has secured settlements with health care corporations and individuals while also recovering millions in restitution for government-funded programs, the release said.

In a sit down with the Citizen Times last year, King emphasized her commitment to prosecuting child predators and those who exploit the community's most vulnerable. Under her leadership, the U.S. Attorney's Office prosecuted numerous child predators, ensuring justice for victims and securing restitution for victims of sexual exploitation. She also partnered with area school systems, including Buncombe County and Asheville City Schools, and engaged with students on how to prevent school violence and teen dating violence through effective leadership and positive conflict resolution, the release said.

King cited the importance of strengthening partnerships with federal, state and local law enforcement agencies and community stakeholders. She held training seminars on Department of Justice priorities, violent crime, civil rights and human trafficking.

King also advised Attorney General Josh Stein through his Advisory Committee, serving as Chair of the Juvenile

Violence Subcommittee, as well as the Civil Rights Subcommittee and Native American Issues Subcommittee.

"Being U.S. Attorney is an incredible job," said U.S. Attorney King. "It's been an honor and a privilege to have served in this role and I will always be incredibly thankful for the opportunity."

Prior to her role as the region's top federal attorney, King served as the district's deputy criminal chief under then-U.S. Attorney Andrew Murray, who now serves as the district attorney for Henderson, Polk and Transylvania counties. She was also the lead task force attorney for the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force program.

First Assistant U.S. Attorney Lawrence J. Cameron will serve as acting U.S. Attorney until a replacement is named.

*Ryley Ober is the Public Safety Reporter for Asheville Citizen Times, part of the USA Today Network. Email her at rober@gannett.com and follow her on Twitter @ryleyober*

## Conference

Continued from Page 1A

poetry, including his most recent title "Snakedoctor" in 2023, and the Pulitzer Prize finalist "The Common Man" in 2010. His poems have been published in journals and magazines ranging from The Southern Review to The New Yorker, and The Grinnin' Possum Podcast he produces with Steve Cody has released 11 episodes featuring original poetry, history, and old-time music. He teaches at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky, as well as at Warren Wilson College in Swannanoa, where he is a faculty member for the MFA Program for Writers. But he says the poems he writes "feel given to me" by the woods and hills of his Kentucky farm.

"I feel like I'm in a way living in a musical instrument," he said, "and I just have to find the song for that particular moment and put it into words."

The natural world also looms large in Joy's work. He draws inspiration from the woods surrounding his home in mountainous Jackson County, just south of Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

"I think that a lot of people try to create a fictional world, but it winds up being a distorted mirror of a real place," he said. "For me, I knew Jackson County so well that it felt disingenuous to try to fictionalize it, so I just chose to hold very specifically to the place."

Growing up along the Catawba River in North Carolina, Joy was "never cut out to be inside" and has been "obsessed" with fishing "since I could hold a fishing rod." He moved to Jackson County at the age of 18, becoming closely attuned to the subtleties of the region's natural landscape through countless hours spent hunting, fishing, and growing his summer vegetable garden.

Joy is the author of five novels as well as short stories and creative nonfiction pieces that have appeared in publications such as Garden & Gun and The New York Times Magazine. His 2024 novel "Those We Thought We Knew" won the 2023 Thomas Wolfe Memorial Literary Award, the 2023 Willie Morris Award for Southern Fiction, and the 2024 Sir Walter Raleigh Award. His 2016 novel "Where All Light Tends to Go" was an Edgar finalist for Best First Novel and adapted into a film starring Billy Bob Thornton and Robin Wright.

In Joy's novels, readers not only find the last names, patterns of speech, and landmarks familiar to those who know Jackson County well, but they also encounter precise descriptions of the nat-



**Poet Maurice Manning has published eight collections of poetry during his career thus far, including the Pulitzer Prize finalist "The Common Man" in 2010.** PROVIDED BY MAURICE MANNING

ural rhythms that mark time in the mountains — the "thistle-colored flower" of a pink lady's slipper "hanging from a thin green stem like a human heart," in 2018's "The Line that Held Us"; mountains that "took on the look of water" as seen from the top of a fire tower at nighttime in 2020's "When These Mountains Burn."

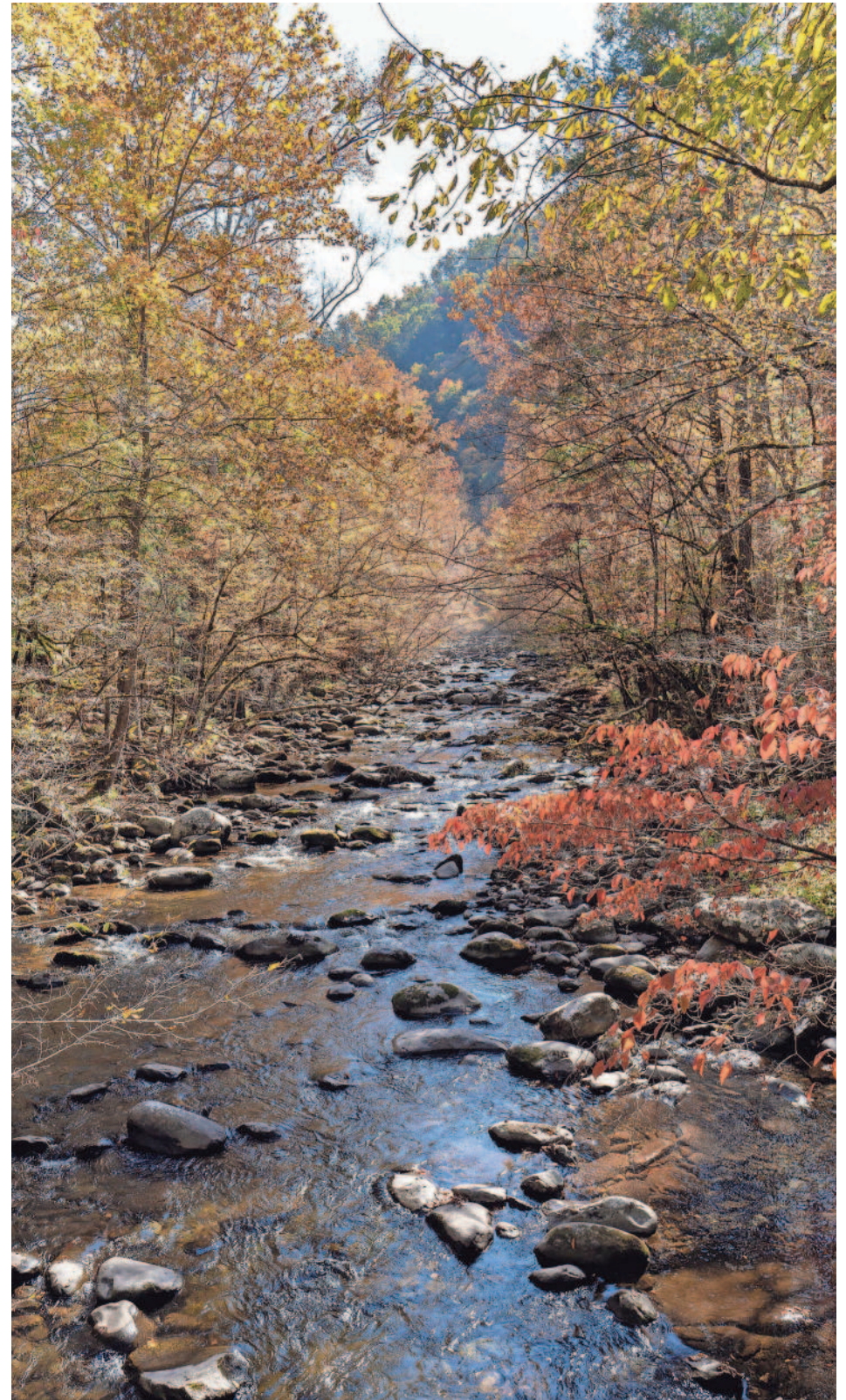
In considering the importance of accurately rendering such details, Joy referenced a piece of advice his mentor and fellow award-winning novelist Ron Rash once gave him: "You have to get the details right in order for the reader to believe the big lie."

"Regardless of the place that you're writing about or the people that you're writing about or the situation that you're writing about, all of it has to ring true," he said.

Not all writers root their work in the settings that surround them each day, Joy said, but doing the work to understand the people and places being portrayed is vital to the success of any work.

Likewise, Manning consistently finds that ring of truth in the streams, wildlife, and ever-changing angles of light that fall across his Kentucky farm. But he believes that the rhythms of nature exert a universal pull on the human heart, regardless of place, and that writers can only benefit by better understanding them. The suffix "graphy" in the word "geography," he points out, means "to write." He thinks of the word as translating to "the written earth."

"I often think that going out into the woods, walking by a stream, if we're paying attention with all of our senses, and then maybe even a sixth sense, we're reading that book," he said. "It's a great wonder that human beings have known about for centuries and centuries, but sadly, in more recent eras, we've lost our knowledge of that book and lost our sense of belonging to it. The



**The Middle Prong of Little River flows through the heart of the Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont campus, offering ample angles to glimpse the beauty of fall and engage in quiet reflection.** PROVIDED BY VALERIE POLK/SMOKIES LIFE

Tremont program is a way to get that back."

*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 prod-*

*ucts and services such as this column. She attended the 2024 Tremont Writers Conference. Learn more at SmokiesLife.org or reach the author at hollyk@smokieslife.org. For information about the 2025 Tremont Writers Conference, including a link to the application, visit writers.gsmiit.org.*

## Citizen Times

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

### Customer service

To view important information online 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 report issues to 1-800-672-2472.

### Operating hours are:

- Monday-Friday: 8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.
- Saturday: 7:00 a.m. - 11:00 a.m. with limited support for Digital
- Sunday: 7:00 a.m. - 11:00 a.m.

### Full access print and digital subscriptions

Subscribe and save today by visiting [citizen-times.com/subscribe](http://citizen-times.com/subscribe).

### Contact us

Customer Service	1-800-672-2472
Executive Editor	Karen Chávez   828-236-8980
Advertising	Lucas Calloway   828-210-6080
Obituaries	<a href="http://citizen-times.com/obituaries">citizen-times.com/obituaries</a>
Classifieds	<a href="http://classifieds.citizen-times.com">classifieds.citizen-times.com</a>

### 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.

### Postal information

The Citizen Times, USPS# 236-000, ISSN# 0336-0000, is published 6 days per week excluding Saturday, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Thanksgiving (observed), Christmas Day (observed) and New Year's Day (observed) by Gannett Media Corp, 14 O. Henry Ave., Asheville, NC 28802. Periodicals postage paid at Asheville, NC and additional mailing offices. **Postmaster:** Please send address changes to Customer Service, PO Box 1387, Fort Smith, AR 72902.