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'ASHEVILLE RISING'

'Good Morning America' comes to WNC

Tiana Kennell
Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE – ABC's Good Morning America, based in New York City, brought its live broadcast to Asheville for a special edition, "Asheville Rising," on the six-month anniversary of Tropical Storm Helene.

The Category 4 Hurricane Helene arrived in Western North Carolina as a tropical storm on Sept. 27 and has been declared the deadliest and costliest storm since Hurricane Katrina. More than 100 lives in WNC and more

than 200 lives across the South were lost due to Helene.

On March 27, nearly 200 Western North Carolina residents, businesses and nonprofit organization leaders, staff and volunteers attended the early morning show, hosted at Highland Brewing Company and BeLoved Asheville in East Asheville.

GMA hosts Robin Roberts, Sam Champion and Ginger Zee shared stories of strength, hope and resilience, and community members were honored for their heroic response and continued relief work.

Highland Brewing, Asheville's pio-

neer brewery, which opened in 1994, and BeLoved Asheville, a grassroots nonprofit, were early responders, including acting as food, water and supply donation and distribution centers.

"It's a surreal honor," said Leah Wong Ashburn, president, CEO and family-owner of the brewery. "We know that we've done good work and we're proud of that. We also are aware that we're surrounded by heroes in Western North Carolina and people are still enduring pain and hardships from this storm."

In collaboration with local affiliate WLOS, the episode illustrated the

widespread damage and rebuilding process of hard-hit communities, including Chimney Rock and Swannanoa.

Zee, a meteorologist, provided live updates on the wildfires blanketing the Carolinas, spurred by dry air and Helene debris, and the weather prediction tracking a needed rain system to arrive over the weekend.

During "Asheville Rising," the tone was reverence, positivity and celebration, as it brought awareness to communities that will need support

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A young volunteer reaches for a piece of litter during the 2023 Spring Clean litter pickup in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY SAVE OUR SMOKIES

Volunteer organizations are key, in the fight against litter



Word from the Smokies
Holly Kays
Guest Columnist

Every year, millions of people visit Great Smoky Mountains National Park to experience its clear mountain streams, verdant views, and diverse forms of natural beauty. The mountains exert a powerful spell — but too often, that spell is broken by the sight of plastic bottles and candy wrappers scattered beside trailheads and overlooks, fast food bags and old tires hung along roadsides, and plastic bags or balloons hung in treetops.

"We care about where we live, we care about our park, and we want it to be a place that is safe and enjoyable," said Swain County resident Cynthia Womble. "It hurts us when we see trash on the side of the road or in a picnic area."

Womble handles social media and engagement for Swain Clean, one of several volunteer organizations working to reduce litter in the park and its gateway communities. Every year, hundreds of people give their time to remove thousands of pounds of garbage that would have otherwise cluttered roadsides throughout the region, eventually entering streams, lakes, or the stomachs of unsuspecting wildlife.



Volunteers weigh a bag of trash collected during the 2023 Spring Clean litter pickup in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The 2025 event is coming up April 5.

"Trash changes animal behavior," said Jerry Willis, who in 2020 founded the nonprofit Save Our Smokies with his wife Darlene. "We've seen bear scat that's got plastic in it, and we've seen animals that have been hit because they're on the side of the road scavenging that free food that somebody chucked out of the car window."

The impact extends far beyond the litter's first landing spot.

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President officials pledge to preserve Signal chat

Suit alleges messages were set to delete

Bart Jansen
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON – Officials from the Trump administration assured a judge Thursday they are preserving messages shared on the Signal app about an attack on Houthis in Yemen, despite the app's option to automatically delete those messages.

The nonprofit advocacy group American Oversight filed a lawsuit Tuesday seeking to preserve the messages among top national security officials from March 11-15 that were shared with a reporter because of the potential for their erasure.

But a Justice Department lawyer and officials from two departments told Chief U.S. District Judge James Boasberg they were already working to ensure the messages are preserved for the National Archives and Records Administration.

"We are also working with the agencies to preserve whatever records they have," said Amber Richer, a Justice Department lawyer.

With the agreement of government officials, Boasberg ordered them to preserve the Signal chat record.

The chat set off a political firestorm after Jeffrey Goldberg, The Atlantic's editor-in-chief, revealed he was inadvertently included on the chat.

He later published the thread of messages that described the planes, flight times and targets hours before the attack.

National security adviser Mike Waltz took responsibility for inadvertently including Goldberg. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard and CIA Director John Ratcliffe were also on the chat.

The lawsuit named those officials as defendants, along with Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent and the

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Volunteer

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“The thing is, litter doesn’t stay where it’s thrown,” Willis said. “All that garbage that’s laying there on the side of the road or in the woods degrades, and the plastics degrade. And all that gets into the water system, and it gets into the little stream there beside it, which leads to a creek, which leads to a river, and it just never stops.”

Save our Smokies launched in October 2020 after the Willises got caught in a traffic jam on Newfound Gap Road. Crawling over the mountain, they noticed a disturbing amount of trash littering the roadside. Willis started the Save Our Smokies Facebook group that evening, never imagining it would turn into a full-blown nonprofit organization with more than 150 volunteers. Since its creation, Save Our Smokies has collected 25,000 pounds of trash, and its biggest event of the year, the annual Spring Clean that mobilizes volunteers throughout the park, is coming up on Saturday, April 5, marking its fourth year.

When Save Our Smokies first started, the litter situation was dire. Patrolling Foothills Parkway, volunteers frequently found decades-old tires, sometimes removing 30 of them in a single day. But the group has made “large gains” in the years since, Willis said; tires are now rare finds and overall the backlog of old garbage has gone down. In its first year, Save Our Smokies collected 9,300 pounds of trash. That number fell with each subsequent year, with the group logging 2,780 pounds in 2024.

Over the same period, volunteer hours also fell as life returned to normal in the wake of the pandemic, but Willis believes that the decline in accumulated litter has helped drive that decrease in participation — not the other way around.

“It’s a lot less sensational when you say we picked up 200 pounds of garbage today than when you say we had a pickup that was 4,600 pounds,” he said.

There’s a sense of satisfaction in knowing their efforts are making a difference, but nevertheless there is still an “awful lot” of trash to pick up, Willis said. And graffiti removal in the park — the other focus of Save Our Smokies — hasn’t slowed down at all.



A Save Our Smokies volunteer removes graffiti from an overlook in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. PROVIDED BY SAVE OUR SMOKIES

“We clean graffiti from an area and then we go right back, and it’s already started back within the same day,” he said. “We’re fighting that mentality that, ‘It’s okay, it’s just graffiti.’ We see families teaching and guarding their children while their children are doing graffiti. They’re standing there watching out for them. Why are we teaching the next generation to do this?”

Save Our Smokies isn’t fighting litter alone. Willis said the park has been a “tremendous partner” to Save Our Smokies, and its Volunteer-in-Park program includes a Parkwide Litter Patrol force. Unlike Save Our Smokies, which focuses on organizing group litter patrol events, the VIP program recruits volunteers who work individually according to their own schedule. Independent groups on the North Carolina and Tennessee entrances to the park, Swain Clean and Keep Sevier Beautiful are also vital partners in the litter control effort.

“You’re never going to get rid of litter, unfortunately, but our main goal is educating people about litter and what it does to the environment,” said Lisa Bryant, executive director of Keep Sevier Beautiful. “We try to start young and instill good habits with the kids.”

Established in 2002, Keep Sevier Beautiful works with about 800 volunteers each year to organize more than

100 events focused on beautification, invasive plant removal, and recycling and waste reduction, as well as litter pickup and education. The group conducts educational programs in all Sevier County schools and many after-school programs, teaching children about the harms of littering. It also holds roadside cleanups throughout the year, including several on the Gatlinburg Spur, park by-passes, and trails. One March cleanup on the Spur yielded 78 bags of trash.

“We see a lot of plastic bottles, a lot of Styrofoam, and things like that where you know it came from a fast food chain,” Bryant said.

Swain Clean’s structure is less formal than Save Our Smokies or Keep Sevier Beautiful, but its volunteers are just as committed to the mission. A sub-chapter of the Swain County Chamber of Commerce, Swain Clean has a core group of about 25 people, with roughly 50 who participate in cleanups at least once per year, Womble said. On the third Saturday each month, the group meets outside the Swain County Visitor Center and Museum in Bryson City — known as the old courthouse building — and then disperses to that week’s cleanup site. But Swain Clean’s impact is much greater than the sum of its monthly pickups.

“Whenever any of our Swain Clean members are in the park, they’re always

going to be taking out trash,” said Womble. “We have folks who walk at Deep Creek at least two or three times a week, and when they walk, they’re always going to have a trash bag with them, and they’re going to pick up whatever they see.”

The group also collaborates on larger litter removal efforts, like the Save Our Smokies Spring Clean event coming up April 5 or the Fontana Lake Cleanup Event held each fall. In 2024, more than 30,000 pounds of trash were hauled from the shoreline during the three-day event.

Though tourists and tourism-related endeavors bear some responsibility for the litter these groups encounter, locals also contribute. Discarded mattresses, washers, dryers, and tires have all been found inside the park, believed to be dumped there by people who live nearby. According to Womble, identifying information included on various prescription bottles, bank statements, and water bills that Swain Clean volunteers pick up along the road also shows that local residents are contributing to the problem.

“I really don’t think people realize what litter does to the environment,” Bryant said.

Keeping the park and its gateway communities litter-free is a never-ending task, but with every piece of trash sent to its proper destination comes a feeling of satisfaction that encourages these volunteers to keep going.

“I don’t know many people who can’t at least pick up a piece of trash and put it in the trash can,” Womble said. “It doesn’t take that much time. It’s something you can do in 10 minutes, sometimes even five minutes, and it makes a difference.”

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.

To participate in the April 5 Spring Clean event in the park, register at SaveOurSmokies.org or contact Willis at info@SaveOurSmokies.org. Find Swain Clean at [Facebook.com/Groups/Swain-Clean](https://www.facebook.com/Groups/Swain-Clean) and Keep Sevier Beautiful at KeepSevierBeautiful.org.

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