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TREMONT WRITERS CONFERENCE

Writers anticipate 'open doors'

Holly Kays

Special to the Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

Crystal Wilkinson has always known she was a writer. But it wasn't until well into adulthood that she realized she could make a living at it.

"I was always writing," she said, "and at some point I remember saying to myself, 'Well, the literal definition of being

published is 'to be made public.' So what does that mean?"

The question sent Wilkinson on a journey that has led her to a successful career as a writer of poetry, fiction, and memoir. A former Kentucky poet laureate, Wilkinson published her culinary memoir *Praisesong for the Kitchen Ghosts* in 2024 and joined the faculty of the third annual Tremont Writers Conference in 2025. This year, she'll once

again mentor nonfiction writers when the conference returns to the Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont from Oct. 21-25, co-organized by Smokies Life.

"There are lots of worthwhile writers' conferences out there, and no doubt each one has something to offer," said Jeremy Lloyd, Tremont's manager of

See **WRITERS**, Page 7A



Attendees gather around a campfire during the 2025 Tremont Writers Conference. ROBIN PYLE/SMOKIES LIFE



Ollie Super, 8, poses for a portrait with her adoptive parents, Britany and Jason, on March 25 at their home in Eden. PHOTOS BY ALLISON LEE ISLEY/FOR KFF HEALTH NEWS

COVERAGE ISSUES

State-run insurance plans for foster kids leave some without doctors

Andrew Jones
KFF Health News

Ollie Super has moved in and out of cancer treatment since she was diagnosed with neuroblastoma as a toddler in foster care. Now 8, the second grader is dealing with it again. Her cancer came back late last year.

Ollie's parents, who adopted her in 2020, tried to sign her up for a clinical trial using CAR T-cell therapy — which genetically reprograms a patient's white blood cells to help them fight cancer — at UNC Health in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, an hour-and-a-half drive from their home in Eden.

Her mother, Britany Super, described it as Ollie's "last option."

But in early March, Super recalled, UNC Health's financial office told them the bad news: The state's new insurance for kids in foster care wasn't going to pay for the treatment.

See **FOSTER KIDS**, Page 4A



Ollie has moved in and out of cancer treatment since she was diagnosed with neuroblastoma as a toddler in foster care. Ollie's parents adopted her in 2020.

U.S.-Iran ceasefire on tenuous ground

Swapna Venugopal Ramaswamy, Christopher Cann, Melina Khan and Michael Loria
USA TODAY

President Donald Trump's ceasefire with Iran was on tenuous ground on April 9 after Israel launched its deadliest day of strikes on Lebanon yet and Tehran vowed not to desert its allies.

A day after announcing the Iran war ceasefire, Trump took to social media to warn the country that if the "REAL AGREEMENT" was not complied with, all U.S. military assets would remain in place ready for a military response.

He warned Iran to keep the Strait of Hormuz open and safe but did not address the strikes in Lebanon in the post.

"If for any reason it is not, which is highly unlikely, then the 'Shootin' Starts,' bigger, and better, and stronger than anyone has ever seen before," he wrote.

Meanwhile, strikes on Lebanon, which borders Israel came on April 8, a day after United States and Iranian leaders announced a break in hostilities to hold peace talks and for oil shipments through the Strait of Hormuz to resume, a key breakthrough in the agreement. But in the wake of Trump's announcement, parties involved were soon at odds over whether the break in fighting included Lebanon.

"The Iran-U.S. Ceasefire terms are clear and explicit: the U.S. must choose — ceasefire or continued war via Israel. It cannot have both," Iran's Foreign Minister Seyed Abbas Araghchi said in a statement as bombs hit Beirut.

'We will not leave Lebanon alone'

On April 8, Israel carried out its largest bombardment of Lebanon since the start of the war, killing over 250 people, according to the Lebanese Health Ministry.

While Hezbollah initially halted fire following the announcement of the ceasefire, it has since responded to the Israeli attacks by firing rockets at northern Israel.

Israeli strikes killed between 180 and 260 people and left around 1,000 people wounded in Lebanon on April 8, local authorities reported.

See **CEASEFIRE**, Page 4A



Writers

Continued from Page 1A

field and college programs and co-organizer of the conference. “What sets ours apart is the intimacy of the experience. We’re not very big, so it’s impossible to ever feel lost in the crowd. Only seven or so writers are in each cohort, plus the writing leader. And open mic night gives everyone in the conference the chance to hear everyone else’s work, regardless of writing genre.”

The term “conference” can sound “a little stuffy,” Lloyd said. But that’s not Tremont. Participants spend their first night gathered around a campfire. An old whiskey barrel serves as a podium for readings. Participants and faculty eat their meals together in a cafeteria-style dining room, the wilderness of the Great Smoky Mountains right outside the door — all making for “a pretty soulful combination.”

Ron Rash, Parris Distinguished Professor in Appalachian Cultural Studies at Western Carolina University and author of 20 books of poetry and fiction, will serve as guest writer for the 2026 conference. Award-winning Cherokee novelist Kelli Jo Ford will lead the fiction cohort, and Wilkinson will lead the non-fiction cohort. Linda Parsons, a celebrated playwright and Knoxville’s current poet laureate, attended the 2024 conference as a member of the poetry cohort — and this year she will lead it.

“We’re living in a lot of chaos right now,” Parsons said, “so I feel that a conference like Tremont is a way to breathe in a whole different way, to breathe in this bracing, fresh air that you have in the mountains, that’s clean and pure, and to take that into ourselves and to refresh and renew in a way that I’m sure everyone needs, desperately.”

Tremont is a place where the cares of the present can be eclipsed by the beauty of nature and the richness of the past, the palpable feeling that “we’re surrounded by other lives and other generations and other struggles and strivings and sorrows and joys,” Parsons said. Then there’s the camaraderie and buzz of energy that comes from community with other writers. Participants spend the conference week living together within the national park, sleeping in the dormitories on Tremont’s campus. That experience was “very interesting and very connecting,” Parsons said, imparting a feeling of unity.

For Wilkinson, the conference offered a unique mix of fast-paced intensity and reflective slowness — coupled with a natural beauty that enticed her back for 2026.

“Being able to walk out every morning and stand on top of that hill at Tremont, up where we had breakfast and had our courses, and looking out, reminded me of my childhood and reminded me of the meadows and valleys and trees that know me,” she said.

That childhood took place on her grandparents’ farm in rural Kentucky, where Wilkinson developed a love of the natural world and a comfort with expressing herself through the written word. But when it came



Crystal Wilkinson speaks during a panel discussion at Blount County Public Library offered to the public as part of the 2025 Tremont Writers Conference, while fellow faculty member Karen Spears Zacharias looks on. ROBIN PYLE/SMOKIES LIFE

to her career, Wilkinson said, “I never had lofty goals. I think I had practical goals.”

Much of her work explores the stories of Black people in Appalachia, a culture that was Wilkinson’s whole world growing up but that she rarely saw represented in books or movies. She became “highly interested” in making those stories public and sought opportunities to read her poems aloud — a painful exercise for someone as shy as she was — and then began to pursue her next goal: getting a piece published “in a magazine that I’ve heard of.” Wilkinson recast many of the rejections she received as “love notes,” responses from editors who declined to publish her piece but offered complimentary feedback on a character or plotline.

“There was something for me that felt as if I was communicating with a larger world, even if it was one editor at a time, without being published,” she said.

Both as a teacher at the University of Kentucky and a cohort leader at Tremont, she seeks to instill that kind of attitude in her students: be persistent, write from the heart, cultivate connection.

“Writing for me is not just a profession,” she said. “It’s a way of communicating, and this idea of shaping my own experience into something artful that can lead to some greater level of understanding. Shaping it in a way that the reader has some understanding not just of me or my characters, but of themselves.”

Perhaps the best example of this is her newest title, the 2024 culinary memoir *Praisesong for the Kitchen Ghosts*. The book weaves together stories of food and family spanning five generations of Black country cooks. It’s about specific recipes, memories, and traditions — but, at a higher level, about the human desire for grounding and identity. In one chapter, Wilkinson writes about the love for blackberries she shared with her mother, and how later in life she realized her affinity for the fruit was mostly about its ability to transport her back to her childhood on Indian Creek, “where me, my cousins, Mama and her siblings, Granny and Granddaddy, and all those who came before would don

boots, long sleeves, pants, rags soaked in coal oil in the sweltering heat of summer to stave off the stinging bite of chiggers while we picked wild blackberries that grew abundantly on our land.”

They’re specific details, unique to Wilkinson’s memory, but with a ubiquitous yearning underneath. Parsons shares that approach.

“I always feel that through the specific comes the universal,” Parsons said, “and that’s what I try to do. I may be grounded, say at the beginning of the poem, in a particular place, but then I want it to lift off from that place or that experience into a more human, universal observation or experience.”

An eighth-generation Tennessean, Parsons has been writing seriously since the early ’80s, creating poems and plays while also serving as an editor at the University of Tennessee for 30 years until her retirement in 2018. Her work explores the complexities of place, family, and the natural world.

“It’s very much my identity,” she said. “It’s how I both give to the world and see the world.”

Her garden is her most frequent source of inspiration. It’s a place of light and darkness, competition and cooperation: themes that are simultaneously ancient and contemporary, grounding her poetry in place while also allowing it to stretch toward the core of human experience.

“Resurrection, life, death — everything happens there,” she said. “Over the last 20 years or so, I’ve been using the garden very heavily in my work. I always say, I feed it, and it feeds me.”

She found similar inspiration while attending the 2024 conference. Being at Tremont “opened a door for me that surprised the heck out of me,” she said, allowing her to put herself in the “head and the eyes and the heart of a ranger” as she wrote. That perspective culminated in the creation of a poem, titled, “Beyond,” that led the fall 2025 cover feature for *Smokies Life Journal*.

“*The back of beyond*, people say/ of the Great Smokies, but there’s no distance/ or depth hereabouts, only forever and amen,” she wrote. “It’s not mine, even though my boots mark/ its shadowy trails, the canopy beyond godhead. . . . I see beyond what cannot be/ timbered or counted for lost, what cannot top/ the pockets of earthly greed.”

“I’m still amazed by that poem,” Parsons said. “It was like it was in there living already, and it just needed to come out and greet the world.”

The 2026 Tremont Writers Conference, jointly produced by Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont and Smokies Life, will take place Oct. 21–25 in Townsend, Tennessee, on the Tremont campus within Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Applications will be accepted through May 15. Visit writers.gsmit.org for more information.

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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