

Down by the river

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Spring dinner to feature Knotts

Kathy Knotts will share her experiences as an AmeriCorps Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement/ Volunteers In Service to America member during the spring Roundtable meeting Thursday, March 19, at the Gathering Room, Main Street, Marion. The dinner will start at 6 p.m.

Knotts recently completed her year of service with the Roundtable and moved to Maryland where her husband, Justin Laughlin, has been working since last year. While she enjoyed working with the Roundtable, Knotts is pleased that her family is once again altogether all the time. (See story, P. 4)

Following Knotts' talk, awards will be presented to individuals and groups who make significant contributions to water quality. To reserve a place at the table, call the Roundtable office at 276.628.1600 **by Friday, March, 13**. Tickets are \$24 plus tax per person (includes meal, drink, room fee, gratuity).

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River Cleanup

The Roundtable partnered with Keep Southwest Virginia Beautiful to remove 2.34 tons from a dumpsite in Scott County as part of regional Clinch River cleanups funded by TVA and an unnamed donor. Another cleanup removed 4 tons. See P. 7.



Photo by Carol Doss

People come and go, bringing hope, leaving a legacy

By Carol Doss, Executive Director

With this issue, I say good-bye and heartfelt thanks to Kathy Knotts and hello and welcome to Lilli Pickens. Kathy just finished her one-year term of service with Upper Tennessee River Roundtable as our AmeriCorps member through the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement Volunteers In Service To America program. During Kathy's last week, our new member, Lilli Pickens arrived. It was great having the two of them working together to ease the transition.

Kathy contributed a lot of time, talent and energy to the Roundtable during her year. Actually, I can't believe the year is already over. We started off in a whirlwind of activity and stayed incredibly busy, but Kathy kept on top of things throughout the year. Kathy achieved many accomplishments, but to me, two things really stand out. She agreed to take on our FaceBook postings and did a superb job. This is a task that often goes by the wayside because no one takes the time to do the updates. Kathy made time on a regular basis to post events and activities and, as a result, really increased our viewings and friends. As I look back at the past year, another thing that stands out is Kathy's initiative. She saw a need for something, asked about it and when given the go ahead, went full force to get something done. I appreciated that so very much. She really helped make activities more successful and the planning more thorough. Kathy, I appreciate all of your contributions.

I look forward to working with Lilli Pickens who seems eager to be starting her one-year term of service with the Roundtable. Lilli moved from Illinois to Abingdon after attending Pre-Service Orientation in Denver, CO. When you see her, please help to make her feel welcome.

Although AmeriCorps member Willie Dodson is not technically the Roundtable's VISTA member, we provide an office for him and claim him for our own. Willie is the OSMRE/VISTA member for Clinch River Valley Initiative, but he does a tremendous amount of work for the Roundtable. Willie decided to stay for a second year, so I am thrilled to be able to continue to collaborate with him.

Another big change on our staff is with Adam Wells, our Guest River coordinator. Adam decided to take another job, but he will continue to work part-time for the Roundtable to finish out the septic work (see next page for Adam's description of the work). I really appreciate Adam spending additional time with us to get the work done. He is doing an excellent job with this program and I really don't want to lose him to his new job, but I wish him well.

Life is always rewarding, although a bit uncertain, working for the Roundtable, a nonprofit that is exceptionally successful thanks to our leadership, our partners and our hard working staff. Although a small staff in numbers, we accomplish a tremendous amount of work focused on cleaner rivers in our watershed. Funding is never certain from one year to the next, but we are blessed to have a number of grants and cooperative agreements as well as the very generous donations from our members and donors. Thanks to each of you, we continue to operate and are still going strong.

Guest River DEQ grant gets extension

By Adam Wells, Guest River Coordinator

Upper Tennessee River Roundtable's Guest River Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) grant, which was to expire last December, is extended until June 30. DEQ granted the extension to allow the Roundtable more time to work on the septic repairs aspect of the grant.

Our septic tank pump-out program is now complete, having pumped out 53 septic tanks in the watershed. Other successes include the final EPA approval of the TMDL Implementation Plan, which is now live on DEQ's website. We've made good progress so far on the repairs component, with 11 current projects underway. However, seeing that there wouldn't have been enough time to complete these projects before the deadline, DEQ worked with us to grant an extension.

It's been over a year now that I've been on the job as the Guest River Coordinator working for the Roundtable. While I've had many other duties, a lot of my business has to do with talking about people's business. That's right, their poop. One of the best ways to find a failing septic system is simply by going door to door in a neighborhood and asking around. "How's your toilet flushing? Ever smell like doo doo in the yard? When was the last time you had your poo tank pumped?" Yep, I've said all those things at one point or another, varying of course on the audience.

The thing I love about the work is that people kind of let down their guard. There's just no way around it. Here I am, asking about what happens when they flush the toilet. Depending on how things go, I may open up the lid to their septic tank and take a long, careful look at what's going on down there. It levels the playing field and makes it easy to connect to people on a personal level.

Once you've inspected the place where the entire households' unwanted business goes, people really open up on a whole new level. While I always maintain a professional attitude, I find that by the time the work is all done I've become more of a friend to many of the people. I remember a conversation I had with one of our contractors when I first started on the grant. I had called him to talk about one of the projects we had underway and started with the usual "how are you?" His response was priceless. He said, "Buddy, I'm livin' the dream. And I bet you wouldn't expect to hear that from somebody who pumps poop for a living, now would ya?" He wasn't lying, either. I got a good laugh and we went on to talk business, but what he said stuck with me.

Now a year later, I'm starting to get it. People just treat you differently when you show up to help them make their septic problems go away. They welcome you into their homes and readily show you things that they'd never show a normal house visitor. They relate to you on a personal level. They sit you down and give you a slice of pie and a Coke®.

The dream I want to live has a clean Guest River in it. A river that I'd feel good about jumping into on a hot day and one that I'd feel proud to pass on to the next generation to enjoy. It's a big dream, but if we all dream together I believe we'll be able to live it someday soon.

AmeriCorps VISTA member reaches 4,000 children in year

By Kathy Knotts, OSMRE/VISTA

It was a busy period for me as my year with the Roundtable came to a close. September through November was environmental education season – so a lot of my time was spent on these activities, which also included outreach and publicity. My reports to AmeriCorps put my total outreach for the year at over 4,000 children! Isn't that amazing?

This is one place where I feel like the Roundtable really shines. We are at as many education events as we can physically get to – and it really makes a difference in the lives of children in this region. We may be their only link to what's going on in their watershed. It's certainly something I will carry with me into my next big conservation adventure.

I wrapped up a lot of projects as we prepared for the new VISTA member, Lilli Pickens, to come on board. I helped plan the youth summit and had hoped to talk there about something I have grown to love—macroinvertebrates—but the event had to be postponed due to the weather.

For Martin Luther King Jr. Day, AmeriCorps VISTAs are tasked with spending the day “on” in national service – so I joined three other VISTAs from across our region in a cleanup along the North Fork of the Holston River working with Raymon Grace, who has spearheaded cleanups along North Fork River Road for more than 30 years. The weather was lovely – a rare warm January day was quite a treat! I really enjoy the opportunity to get out in the community, and out in nature, doing good work for SWVA.



I encourage everyone to spend a few hours every month getting out and also picking up litter, it's a small act that has such an impact.

I also enjoyed working on new projects in Smyth County – it has been an honor to represent the Roundtable in my own backyard. I only wish I could stay in the area long enough to see some of this work completed. As many of you know, my term ended and I relocated to the Annapolis, MD, area with my family. It is going to be exciting learning a new watershed and getting to know the people and culture surrounding the Chesapeake Bay. But I will always hold a special place in my heart for Southwest Virginia and Appalachia.

Castlewood Students collect, dramatize Clinch River oral histories

By Willie Dodson, CRVI OSMRE/VISTA

Over the fall and winter months of 2014, 35 Castlewood High School (CHS) drama students joined with the Clinch River Valley Initiative to collect oral histories illuminating the role of the river in individual lives and in the lives of our Clinch River communities. During the same period of time, I collected a dozen interviews with folks from Tazewell on down to Ft. Blackmore.

Our interviews gathered stories ranging from boating to baptizing, farming to fishing, moving away, coming home, finding home anew. Interviewees ranged in age from early 20s to 90 years old. Sometimes interviewees were family members of interviewees. Often, they were not previously known to their interviewers.

The project has hinged on the openness and eagerness of Pam Roberson, English and Drama teacher at CHS. When introduced to the project by Terry Vencil, a fellow educator and an active member of the Clinch River Valley Initiative's water quality and environmental education action teams, Roberson jumped at the opportunity to engage her students in such a creative learning experience.

"This is one of the most unique projects that I have ever been blessed to be involved with! The students have been able to discover not only information about their community, but also their relatives and neighbors, and, ultimately, themselves! They have been able to make real connections with an older generation, and, even more importantly, these connections are being preserved through the recorded interviews," Roberson said.

At several points in the fall semester, I visited with Roberson's drama classes to introduce students to the concept and methodology of oral history. We read excerpts from oral history collections gathered near Boone, North Carolina and listened to excerpts from



Teacher Pam Roberson is instrumental in oral history project success.



UVA Wise student Damean Mathews of Tazewell participated in the oral history project with the interview airing on WMMT. Damean will assist Willie in a conference presentation.

some of my own then ongoing interviews for the CRVI oral history project. While many students were vocally excited about the project, all were not without reservations. However according to Roberson, the experience turned out positive even for some of those who were not initially as eager to participate.

"One of my students confided in me that he dreaded the interview with the 90+-year-old that he had contacted. After a bit of encouragement, he approached the interview with more confidence, Roberson shared.

"Afterwards, he was delighted to tell me that this gentleman was "amazing" and "fascinating" and that he began a friendship that he intends to keep. He even remarked that he was thankful that their paths had crossed and that he plans to visit the gentleman occasionally, making sure he keeps that special connection! A friendship between a seventeen-year-old and a ninety-year-old is something special indeed!" Roberson concluded.

Throughout the spring semester, CRVI's student-oral-historian partners will be writing an original play based on their interviews. This play will be performed at the 17th Annual Clinch River Days Festival in St. Paul during the weekend of June 5-7.

Tracking education data shows tremendous outreach effort

By April Grace, Volunteer Educator

As a member of the Southwest Virginia Environmental Education Team (SWEET), I have been compiling a list of environmental education events held by our partners across the Upper Tennessee River Watershed. All other education networks in Virginia have been asked to do this as well.

Once all the data is collected the list will be sent to David Ruble, Environmental Education Coordinator at Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation in Richmond. He will then be able to tell how many people were reached, what type of activities were done and the age/type of participants.

I also compiled this information for 2013 and found out that as a region we reached over 11,000 people through our various environmental



These trash treasures were created in 4-H programs that we coordinated with funding from Tennessee Valley Authority.

education activities and events, such as Conservation Camp and 4-H. We are predicting that 2014 will show even larger results.

Roundtable, KSVB win first place award for Stone Creek project

Upper Tennessee River Roundtable and Keep Southwest Virginia Beautiful won first place in Keep America Beautiful competition for the Stone Creek Outdoor Classroom and Community Park Project in Pennington Gap. Carol Doss, executive director for both nonprofits, entered the competition under litter prevention and community revitalization. Carol accepted the award during the KAB annual conference in Washington, D.C. in January.

The project was funded through many sources, with U.S. Fish and Wildlife providing the most support through settlement funds used to buy a former coal transfer station in Lee County's name and reclaim the property. Keep Southwest Virginia Beautiful became involved after receiving a Lowe's grant from KAB that provided funding for walking trails, fence, trees, recycled park benches, trash cans and ash receptacles. The joint effort between project partners resulted in a tremendous community resource.



Lowe's sponsored a KAB conference session with participants building park benches for a group in Maryland. Carol Doss worked on this team with Carolyn Tomlinson of Keep Dorchester County Beautiful, SC and David Forsell of Keep Indianapolis Beautiful and, of course, a very helpful Lowe's associate.

Anonymous donor and TVA fund Clinch River cleanups

The Clinch River watershed is cleaner, thanks to funding from Tennessee Valley Authority and an unnamed donor. Two significant cleanups took place in October, one at Cleveland in Russell County, with 43 volunteers removing 4 tons and one near Boozy Creek in Scott County, with 19 volunteers removing 2.34 tons of litter and bulky items. The donor is also funding four household hazardous waste collection events and dumpsite cleanups in Tazewell and Wise counties.



Volunteers pause for a photo after the Cleveland Cleanup near the Barrens Natural Area Preserve.



Above, the late Jim Conrad interviewing Kathy Knotts. We all miss Jim's good nature and excellent coverage of our events. This was the last story he did about our work. Photos by Carol Doss



Scott County cleanup featured Wise County's buggy that was rolled over the hill, filled and pulled back up many times.

Chilhowie Low Water Bridge

Wintry weather delayed the start of fish passage projects in Smyth County, with new demolition dates rescheduled for March. Shown at right is the low water bridge with water flowing over



top just before the first snowstorm began. Signs were placed on both sides of the water to keep the public safely out of the area. Fish passage, fishing and paddling are expected to be improved as a result of this project and removal of Marion Ice Plant Dam.

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