

Wilderness Scouts...from Page 1A



A scout presents a handmade basket to a former volunteer who left due to a sudden illness. The volunteer had just started to help the child make the basket when she fell ill, and the child wanted to finish the basket as a get-well present. The work and gesture were initiated by the scout. Photo/Submitted

So, Plousis reached out to Cornwell to see what he could do, and Cornwell got back to him that they could use a bus to transport the scouts. That's when Plousis made a fateful call to a New Jersey newspaper to get the word out that he was looking for a bus for children.

Soon after, Plousis received a call at home from Trump, who had read about the request and decided to give the Wilderness Scouts one of his buses. Trump quickly arranged the donation.

"Waiting for me the next day was a large, black-trimmed, air-conditioned, 48-passenger, diesel bus – one of a fleet used by the Trump organization to shuttle employees," Plousis wrote in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* in 2018.

Cornwell is particularly proud of that donation, though he's thankful for all donations, including the 2018 Chevrolet Silverado 2500 work truck that's really come in handy the last couple of years helping him serve the children of the Wilderness Scouts.

There have been more than 8,500 scouts over the years, consisting of boys and girls between the ages of 3 and 16 from numerous states who, like the seniors and families they assist, come from impoverished circumstances.

And the Navy Special Forces veteran is no stranger to hardship himself.

Having been raised by a single mother after his father was murdered, it was his own personal poverty that inspired Cornwell to start the scouts, as he couldn't stand to see kids growing up the way he did, being left out of enriching activities because their families couldn't afford them.

As a child, Cornwell used a bamboo pole with chewing gum stuck to the end to fish coins out of the gutter in his hometown of Murphy, North Carolina. He was scrounging money to rent a uniform for the summer baseball program, which his mother couldn't afford even working 12 hours a day, seven days a week as a waitress in the town diner.

With the help of his bamboo pole and some recycled glass bottles, Cornwell finally saved up enough money to rent this uniform, though it was an old one and didn't match the team colors, so the coach made him play in the outfield so he wouldn't stand out.

Cornwell never forgot the way this made him feel, and he never wanted any other kid to feel the same way he did that summer.

That's why the survival skills and life lessons children learn while hiking, camping and interacting with Cornwell and serving their community are so important, because these potentially at-risk youths don't have access to the same opportunities as other kids.

"Many of these children live in one-parent homes," Cornwell said. "Some have been abused, and all are in need of assistance to keep them from slipping further and further away from society's mainstream."

Given the financial hardships scouting families endure, scouts pay no dues and have no uniforms or badges to buy, with all activities provided free of cost using whatever funds and supplies Cornwell is able to procure thanks to the generosity of donors.

"If we are to continue teaching these skills, there must be some funding for operations," Cornwell said. "Several of our longtime sponsors have passed away, leaving a shortfall."

Though our organization makes or repairs older equipment for use by the scouts, it does wear out by use. We also make a lot of new quilts for children and lap quilts for elderly.

"Because there are no salaries being paid by

Wilderness Scouts of America, the community's tax-exempt contributions to the 501(c)(3) go a very long way.

"It doesn't take expensive equipment to learn about and enjoy the great outdoors. Given the chance, nature can provide all that is needed, but learning to identify what is safe must be taught to the youth."

Perhaps the most important lesson Cornwell and the Wilderness Scouts impart to these underprivileged youngsters is to "never, never, never give up," no matter how hard life gets or what challenges come their way.

In the scouts, boys and girls learn to strengthen their character in the face of adversity while receiving other lessons about leadership and competence, with a focus on practical skills like building shelters, starting fires, and finding food and water "while respecting and protecting the environment."

These activities go hand in hand with the overall purpose of the organization, which is "to teach young people to learn by doing, how to cope with life's problems, and to realize that someone may be in ever worse straits," thereby allowing them to "work together to help each other and special senior citizens."

Over the years, scouts have visited hundreds of seniors at their homes, providing them with drilled wells, food, electricity, handicap ramps, and sanitation facilities, resulting in dramatic improvements in living conditions for their elders.

And financial burdens have not gotten any lighter amid COVID-19, either for the scouts and their families or for the seniors the organization assists, and Cornwell said the Wilderness Scouts of America would appreciate any community support people might lend.

Currently, the Wilderness Scouts is looking to procure funds for building and vehicle maintenance, hand sanitizer, quart zip bags, AA and AAA batteries, strong nylon sewing thread, military-type backpacks, toothpaste and Sharpie markers.

Any donations will go a long way toward benefiting the roughly 30 kids currently active in the scouts, giving them a real chance to rise above their circumstances and go out into the world as leaders.

The Wilderness Scouts has graduated many successful leaders over the last 36 years, including Blairsville's own Amber Cheek, who presently serves as Director of Accessibility and Americans with Disabilities Act Coordinator for the University of Missouri.

Cheek was a scout from 1994-2003, or from about the age of 7 to 16. She then transitioned to the role of scout leader until she was 18, and her commitment didn't end there – her volunteerism with the scouts extended to summer breaks during college, managing the office and planning/leading trips.

Both sides of Cheek's family go back generations in the area, so she knows a thing or two about the realities of growing up in Appalachia; her parents worked long hours in factories to provide for the family, which left them little time to accommodate extracurricular activities.

And because her family's income fell in the range that the Wilderness Scouts targets, Cornwell's organization was the only real option for Cheek. And it was an option that changed her life forever.

"The Wilderness Scouts was different. It was created with children like me in mind," Cheek said. "And so, Mr. Harold or one of the

scout leaders would pick us up at school, feed us dinner – a critically important detail for many of my fellow scouts – take us on a hike or another activity, and then drop us off at home with our parents, all for free.

"For most of us, the Wilderness Scouts was the only activity outside of school we were able to participate in."

Cheek is a congenital lower limb amputee, and she found the scouts to be a challenging endeavor. Fortunately, it was a challenge she was up for, and she flourished under the guidance of Cornwell and others who helped her to excel.

"One of the primary ways the Wilderness Scouts impacted me was that, to Mr. Harold and the scout leaders, the fact that I have a disability never impacted their approach to including me," Cheek said. "As a child, I felt that many adults tried to put me in a bubble to attempt to protect me."

"Mr. Harold never did that. In fact, I don't even remember it being discussed. With the Wilderness Scouts, I was not only included, but was pushed to challenge myself. I always knew I would be safe if, for example, my prosthetic malfunctioned. But they never assumed that I couldn't do something unless I myself decided, after trying, that I couldn't."

"As someone who now works in the Disability Rights field, it's amazing to me in retrospect how inclusive the Wilderness Scouts always was – even back when it first started – of children and teenagers with disabilities. The first time I ever saw a wheelchair lift was on the Wilderness Scouts van."

Being a member of the Wilderness Scouts also made Cheek feel powerful and confident, she said, "which I think is very important for a child."

"If I could hike into the woods with a pack on my back, camp in a hammock overnight, light a fire by myself and cook a meal – something many adults couldn't do – what else could I do that I hadn't considered before?" Cheek said. "It was an amazing feeling, and I think I still carry that with me."

Cheek is hopeful that people will continue to see the value in the scouts and support the mission of the organization, which has remained the same for more than three decades now.

"I think that the Wilderness Scouts fulfills an essential need in the community, and I don't think that need has changed since '94, when I joined," she said. "There are so many children and teenagers who are surrounded by hopelessness, who assume that certain things just aren't available to them."

"The Wilderness Scouts helps break through that in a way that I think is valuable and uniquely targeted."

For his part, Cornwell beams when he talks about Cheek, a young woman he got to know over many years' involvement in the scouts. And he remembers a scout who never complained and always gave back to her community, which is something she remembers, too.

"The Wilderness Scouts gave me a strong sense of commitment and service," Cheek said. "We delivered food and firewood to elderly people, cleaned up trails and campsites, delivered school supplies to children, visited nursing homes, and many other projects."

"This was an integral part of the Wilderness Scouts, and that need to be of service definitely took root in me and influenced my career choice to pursue Disability Rights work instead of going into private practice after law school."

After finishing high school, Cheek went on to become a first-generation college graduate, earning a bachelor's degree in Anthropology and Disability Studies from the University of Georgia, and she later earned her Juris Doctor from the University of Missouri School of Law.

Prior to her career at Mizzou, she worked in the Office of Disability Employment Policy at the U.S. Department of Labor in Washington, D.C., where she was a Presidential Management Fellow and Co-Director of the Workforce Recruitment Program, a nationwide employment program for persons with disabilities.

And Cheek gives a lot of credit for her successes in life to Cornwell and the lessons she learned in scouts, right here in Blairsville, Georgia.

"The Wilderness Scouts not only empowered us, but

it also made us feel proud to be Appalachian," Cheek said. "Mr. Harold taught us that our home in the mountains is a magical place – endlessly fascinating and beautiful – and that we were powerful enough to shape our lives to be what we wanted them to be."

"We learned that there is a deep strength and beautiful tenacity that comes with being Appalachian, and Mr. Harold and the Wilderness Scouts still embody that perfectly."

Many generous people over the years have drawn similar conclusions about Cornwell and his scouts, whom they see as making the best of life by helping their own survive the harshest conditions in the mountains, and donors far and wide have come forward to aid their efforts.

But this assistance has waned in recent years, and the Wilderness Scouts needs the community's support now more than ever to keep doing what they do.

Wilderness Scouts of America, Inc. is a completely independent nonprofit entity not associated with any other scouting organization, and as such is dependent on donations to continue carrying out its mission.

Due to the virus, instead



Two Wilderness Scouts wearing safety goggles and gloves recycle scrap metal out of Butternut Creek. Photo/Submitted

of meeting with kids at the organization's hand-built log cabin in town, Cornwell and his small group of volunteers have been traveling to individual scout homes to stay engaged and complete building projects like signaling mirrors and more.

For more information or to find out how to help, contact Cornwell at 706-400-8191. Monetary donations can be mailed to P.O. Box 807, Blairsville, Georgia, 30514.

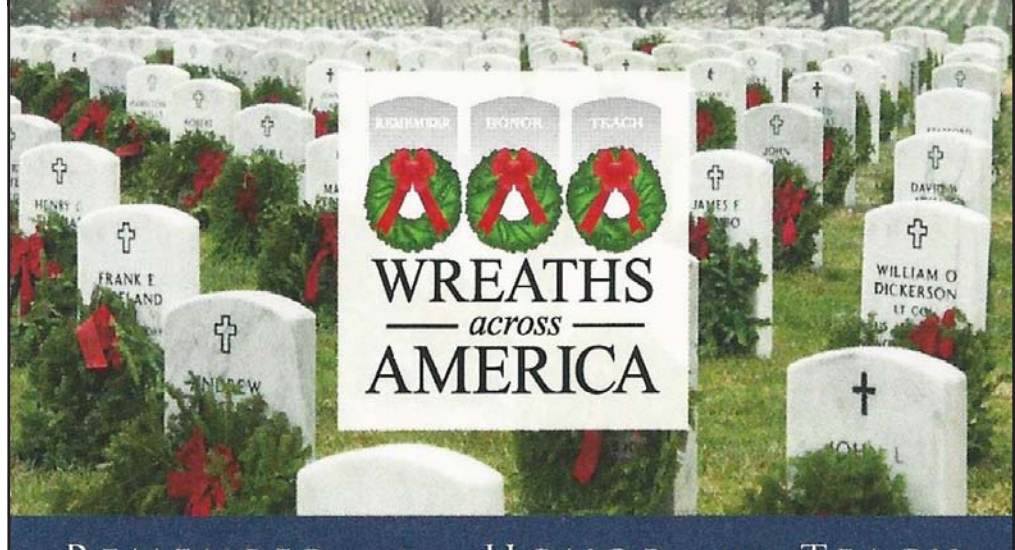
"I encouraged North Georgia News Editor Shawn Jarrard to write this article to draw attention to this much-needed resource," Sheriff Mason said. "Mr. Harold and his volunteers are the 'real deal.'

"Times are hard for many people these days. If you can, please contribute and be a part of this organization – you won't regret it."



A volunteer scout leader assists a Wilderness Scout with a balloon-popping game featuring prizes. Photo/Submitted

Ira Weaver American Legion Post 121 Sponsors Holly Hill Veterans Park Cemetery



REMEMBER ★ HONOR ★ TEACH

The national nonprofit Wreaths Across America (WAA) has announced that Holly Hill Veterans Park Cemetery in Blairsville, GA will join in the effort to support its mission to Remember, Honor and Teach, as an official location for 2020. The cemetery will join the more than 2,100 participating locations across the country on Dec. 19, 2020.

"Our goal is to raise enough funds to place wreaths on the 75 headstones of all the local heroes laid to rest at Holly Hill Cemetery," explained Ron Tanner, Post 121 chair for the WAA project. "We want to ensure that those who served to protect the freedoms of our country will never

be forgotten by their neighbors and friends."

Holly Hill is a non-profit cemetery at 130 Ford Mountain Road. The headstones mark mainly cremated remains of local servicemembers. The Post also sponsors wreaths at the National Veterans Cemetery in Canton, Ga. According to Tanner.

Those interested in sponsoring \$15 wreaths can do so online at:

for Holly Hill Cemetery <https://wreathscrossamerica.org/pages/164337>,

for the National Veterans Cemetery <https://wreathscrossamerica.org/pages/150218>

Anyone interested in vol-

unteering for Wreaths Across America are invited to visit: www.legionpost121.org

National Wreaths Across America Day is a free, non-political, community event open to all people. WAA started as a simple gesture of thanks that has grown into a national movement of dedicated volunteers and communities coming together to not only remember the nation's fallen and honor their service, but to teach the next generation about the sacrifices made for us to live freely.

For more information contact Ron Tanner at 706-400-9452 or iwpost121@gmail.com.