



(Photo by Sam Hobbs)

# FRIENDS OF THE SMOKIES

## Celebrating 20 Years of Preserving, Protecting & Providing

BY JACQUELYN DOBRINSKA

*Nonprofit organizations throughout Asheville and the surrounding area nourish the people within our communities, caring for those in need, protecting our historic heritage, educating young and old, and nurturing our cultural soul. Each month, The Laurel is bringing to our readers some of the stories behind these agencies. This month, the "spotlight" is on Friends of the Smokies.*

As the morning light dawns across a half-million acres of the Southern Appalachian Mountains, an avid hiker crests Clingman's Dome, experiencing a grandeur of spirit not felt in normal daily life. An amateur photographer snaps a shutter, capturing warm hues on the homestead of his ancestors. Twenty school children giggle with delight, exploring their forested classroom complete with waterfalls, wildlife, and wonder.

These comprise but a small cross section of the Great Smoky Mountain National Park (GSMNP), a national

treasure that is in our very own backyard. Moments such as these are made possible in part from the support of Friends of the Smokies, a partner organization that raises funds, increases public awareness, and provides volunteers for important, and often underfunded, projects within the GSMNP.

Straddling the ridge along the border between North Carolina and Tennessee, this is the most visited national park in the U.S. Visitors come from across the country and around the world to enjoy the beauty and rich biodiversity of these ancient mountains.

As with anything that is well loved and extensively used, GSMNP needs regular attention to keep it functioning for humans, animals, and ecosystems alike. The Park Service does this on a tight budget. These have been tough economic times, and last year the Park Service budget was cut \$5 million.

Most parks around the nation charge an entrance fee, but GSMNP is different. It is free. While the reasons are