



Gather 'Round the Campfire

written by Christina Nifong

For the first time in three decades, a nationally-known adventure outpost in Craig County is inviting locals to come play.



*M*ost Saturday nights this summer, the rocking chairs on the front porch will be full. The grassy sites up the gravel road will be dotted

with tents. The campfire lit. The amps turned on, the guitars plugged in. The kitchen will be stirring up a scratch-made dinner. And the crowd — many of whom live within 100 miles of this 500-acre backcountry — will be stoked to have this slice of Southwest Virginia as its destination for the weekend.

It wasn't always this way. For 30 years, Wilderness Adventure at Eagle Landing was reserved for kids enjoying a week at camp or corporations who flew employees in for team-building. In spring and fall, private schools from across the country shuttled students to learn new skills and appreciate the outdoors.

But rarely did Roanokers zipline through the treetops or canoe Craig Creek or pedal over roots and rocks. That wasn't what Wilderness Adventure did.

"There's so many people that don't even know we're here," says Dustin Eshelman, who first connected with WAEL as a 23-year-old trip leader. "We had never been open to the public to come out and stay."

But — as for so many small businesses — 2020 changed everything.

Beautiful mountain
backdrops surround
Wilderness Adventures at
Eagle Landing

"The energy out [at Wilderness Adventure] has always been *amazing*... This has been one of the biggest gifts of my life."

The pandemic wiped an entire season's reservations off the books. WAEL was forced to let every employee go. With no money coming in, the Nervos, who have owned Wilderness Adventure as a family operation since its inception, couldn't pay the mortgage or keep the lights on.

Slowly, Eshelman and Jamie Nervo, connected to this land since her father bought it in 1990, felt their way forward. They created a campground out of a forgotten field. They tapped into a market of cooped-up city folks looking to safely vacation by putting sites and cabins on Hipcamp and Airbnb. And they reached out to the larger Roanoke community like never before.

The result? A getaway with a feel-good vibe that encourages all who show up to leave their worries in the parking lot and let the balm of nature feed their souls.

Until last year, Wilderness Adventure had always been inextricably linked to one larger-than-life man.

Col. Eugene Nervo served for 33 years as a Marine. He and his wife, Patricia, raised seven children in military bases across the globe.

Through it all, Nervo dreamed of finding a patch of trees and fields, cliffs and creeks to shape into a place where adventure and nature would build children's character and self-confidence.

In 1990, Nervo, then 50, began bringing his vision to life. He — with Patricia and several of his kids — cleared land and built cabins, he bought backpacks and mess kits and life jackets. He hired young people to lead hiking trips into the adjacent Jefferson National Forest. Then he advertised his concept — a program more rugged and outdoors-focused than most at the time — across the US. The campers came. They — and



COURTESY OF WILDERNESS ADVENTURE AT EAGLE LANDING





But COVID provided clarity. Either the family would shake things up or they would lose everything.

From the pandemic's disruption, came opportunity. Eshelman and Jamie Nervo committed to picking up the reins, following where this moment led, creating possibility from Wilderness Adventure's potential.

"I just love this place," says Jamie, an artist and business owner who lives in Bent Mountain. "It feels good to do something new."

The two are building on past success. This summer, nine weeks of camp are scheduled, with enrollment higher than in 2019, Eshelman says. Private events have been booked. Some schools and businesses traveled to WAEL this spring; others deferred to a later date.

But there's a flurry of new activity, too. Jamie crafted a labyrinth deep in the woods from pine straw and moss. A six-mile loop for bikers and runners is under construction at the property's perimeter. Four huts used as staff housing are being rehabbed as family cabins for rent.

The season kicked off Mother's Day weekend with a rollicking game of human foosball, live music Saturday night and a Sunday morning brunch served on the lawn, under picture-perfect clouds.

In total, 19 Weekend Hangouts have been scheduled through the end of October. Also, a yoga retreat, a bikepacking event (start in Roanoke, bike to Wilderness Adventure, eat, play and sleep, then bike back), and a trail bike ride are set for early November.

Jamie says she's open to whatever fits. Themed dinners? Retreats for women? Trail races? Skills classes?

"In the beginning, we were trying to think of anything," she says, as she hikes a familiar trail to a bluff overlooking Craig Creek.

She had faith in the land, in her community, in the value of nature as a place to grow and heal. Time will tell if her instincts were right.

But just now, the stage is set, the trails beckon, the kitchen is open — to everyone.

☆

those who led them — were changed by their time in the woods.

"The energy out here has always been amazing," says Eshelman, who met her husband, Pete, at Wilderness Adventure. They were married there; Pete worked as director of operations through 2008. They stayed connected to the place and the Nervo family through the years. "This has been one of the biggest gifts of my life," she says.

There were rough patches and curves along the way, too. Nervo opened and then closed a separate outdoor academy for at-risk kids during the late 1990s. He and his wife divorced in 2009. Over the last decade, the Roanoke region began marketing itself as an outdoor destination, attracting trail runners and mountain bikers and backpackers in search of adventure.

By the time Virginia's governor announced that camps and nonessential travel were canceled last year, Nervo was 80 years old. His children had gathered more than once to discuss what the future of the family business ought to be.

No one could figure out Wilderness Adventure without "The Colonel."

Weekend hangouts, yoga retreats, backpacking, and trail biking are just a few of the many offerings for campers.