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**Veterans find 'Healing Waters'
while competing at Bennett Spring**

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by Steve Smith

October 2023

Veterans find 'Healing Waters' while competing at Bennett Spring

STEVE SMITH
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A group of veterans came to Bennett Spring State Park on a recent warm August day to find some healing and fly fish.

The park hosted the Project Healing Waters Fly Casting Competition, which attracted anglers from all over the U.S.

According to Amy Milne, director of logistics and field support for Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing, the program is a not-for-profit that works with disabled veterans, offering fly fishing as a form of therapy.

"We have more than 200 programs throughout the United States, each of those programs belong to a region," she said.

The 15 participants at Wednesday's event are the regional champions from the organization's 19 regions. They come from Alaska, Florida, Connecticut and other states. They competed in casting accuracy and distant casts.

"They have a six-minute time window, and the field is set up where they are in a casting box, but they can move their feet around," she said. "They will go for accuracy. We have a cast as short as 20 feet and as long as 50 feet. They will go a portion of that six minutes for accuracy, hitting the hula hoop or pie pan."



LCR Photo/Steve Smith

Participants in the Healing Waters fly fishing competition pose for a photo before events began that morning at Bennett Spring State Park.

Milne said participants usually come from a physician's referral for therapy and outdoor recreation.

"We work with everything from traumatic brain injuries, amputees and any health-related conditions that come from their time in the service.

"Any disabled veteran may come in and we start with their core activities. We offer fly tying, rod building, casting, fishing education and day outings," she said. "It's an ongoing program."

She said the program is free to participants.

"It's not a club. We don't have memberships," she said.



Amy Milne



Victor Salazar

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WATERS

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She said the participants build friendships as they compete.

"Everybody's texting and staying in touch. Ideally, this is a long-lasting relationship for them," she said.

She said the volunteers come from the local Springfield and Branson branch and others from Wichita, Kan. and Leavenworth, Kan. They do things like setting up the field and keep score.

Victor Salazar, one of the competitors, said he got involved with Healing Waters through a friend who enjoyed what the program had to offer.

"He recruited me into the program," Salazar said. He said he had never fly fished until he joined the program in 2020.

"I was interested in fly fishing and the camaraderie we search for after we get out of the military."

Salazar said this is his first time to compete in fly casting.

"It's just a great program for the healing and camaraderie, being around other veterans who've had the same experiences that I have," he said.

Tommy Meza, from Fayetteville, N.C., said he recently retired after 28 years in Army special operations and said he found fly fishing a helpful coping mechanism.

"I'm not one to take antidepressants or anti-anxiety medication, so for me, fly fishing has a positive impact as far as relaxation. It's a bunch of retired or disabled veterans talking fly fishing. For me that's just a win-win," he said. "You'd be surprised what it does for you mentally, whether you're catching fish or not, you're always learning something about yourself as far as skill and technique. When you have the opportunity to be outdoors, there's something about nature that recharges you. There's

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Tommy Meza



Angelia Wimbley

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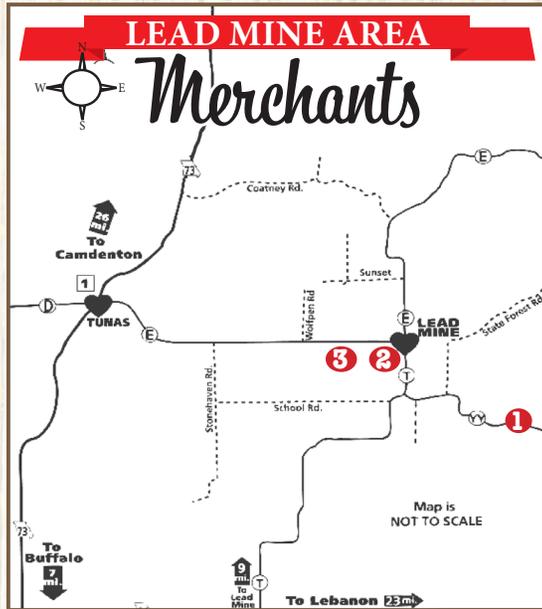
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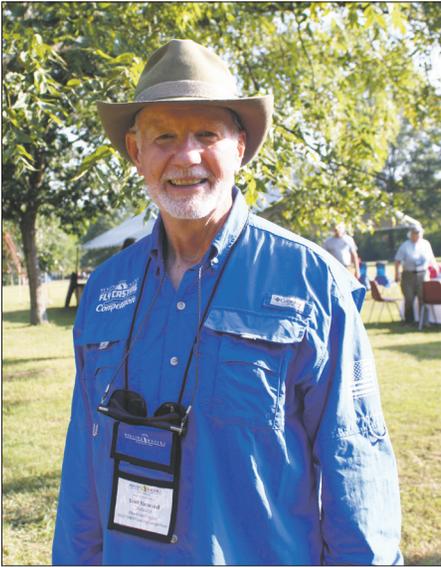


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WATERS

from page 3



Scott Harwood

no stress in your life out there. It's pretty awesome."

Angelia Wimbley of Indianapolis was one of the competitors. She said she enjoyed the camaraderie inspired

by the event.

"I'm here with a bunch of fellow military individuals, the volunteers are often from the military and it's just been a really good time to get together with people who have a baseline experience of serving in the military," she said.

She said the event was mostly for fun.

"It's not serious. Of course, there's going to be first, second and third place, but the main goal is us being together and having that camaraderie," she said.

She said she would love to see more women take part in the program.

"Come on out and join us. It's a lot of fun, a lot of laughs, a lot learning and a lot of good times," she said.

Scott Harwood, of Wichita, runs the Healing Waters Heartland Region Wichita program.

"We're dedicated to the physical and emotional rehabilitation of disabled veterans through fly fishing

activities and education," Harwood said. "We provide a yearlong set of activities to veterans free of charge. We teach them how to tie flies, they get a chance to build their own fly rod, we teach them how to cast. Everything is free to veterans."

Harwood said he is a disabled veteran himself and got involved after meeting a person active with Project Healing.

"I signed up as a mentor, and through the mentoring process, I found I was disabled as well, so I became a participant and by doing that it helped me to physically recover from the things that were bothering me from my service in Vietnam," Harwood said. "It's totally changed my life, and it was a such a good benefit to me, I decided to start a new program in Wichita."

Phil Boren, from Healing Waters' Springfield Heartland Region, said he had reached out to Milne to volunteer.

"They didn't have a program in Springfield or Branson, so that's how

I got started and I take care of all of Southwest Missouri," he said.

Boren said he was drawn to the program by the chance to help veterans.

"I've had a few of them come to me and tell me how much the therapy means to them," he said. "I also serve on the fire department, so I understand how it is to go through some stuff. You need to get your mind taken off those things and that's what this is all about: to help rehabilitate the veterans through the art of fly fishing," he said.

More information about the program can be found at projecthealing-waters.org.



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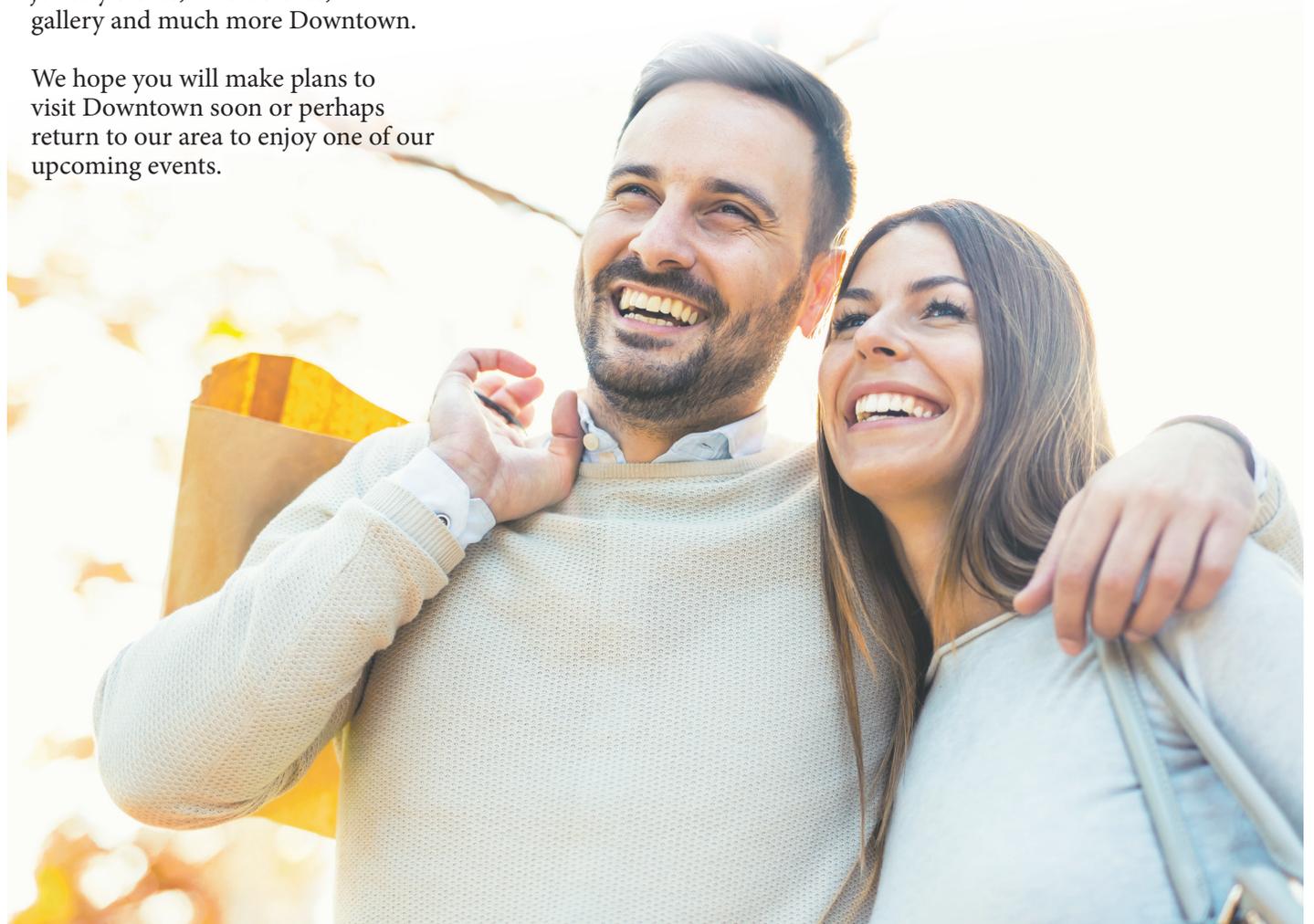
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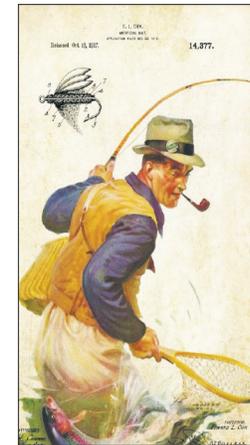



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Bonnie Merrington has served customers at Bennett Spring State Park store for nearly 30 years

LAURA L. VALENTI

When she came to work for Jim Rogers at the Bennett Spring Park Store in 1994 to help him computerize his cabin reservations for the first time, Bonnie Merrington never imagined she would still be there 30 years later.

"This will be my 30th year at the end of this season," she explained while covering the counter in the back of the store on this particular day. Since beginning in computerized cabin reservations, she has continued to help as the store and its contents have expanded tremendously.

"When I started, there was one little shelf of Bennett Spring souvenir items here," she said "and the store was half the size it is now."

The Bennett Spring Store moved into its current building in 1982, but half the space was occupied by the Department of Natural Resources office at that time. After several years, as the store grew, the DNR offices returned to their previous location, and the store doubled in size.

"I had worked for the local hospital for 17 years before coming to Bennett Spring, but I liked the idea of having some time off in the winter. I had a new house and a new grandbaby, and I thought I'd like rocking him by the fireplace and staying home instead of getting out in the ice and snow."

From reservations, Bonnie moved

into ordering. "Ed Simpson, Jim's brother-in-law, still worked here then, and he really encouraged me, and that gave me confidence in doing the job here. Then Jim made me the bookkeeper, and that had me paying the bills for the store and the pool. In 2005, Jim again became the concessionaire for Roaring River State Park at Cassville in addition to Bennett Spring. Then in 2006, I also took on the accounts for the Dining Lodge, Castaways Campground and the Bennett Spring Inn. I take care of all of the accounts. I'm the payroll clerk and serve as the Dayshift Manager."

That includes filling in when someone else has to take off, like this day, when Bonnie was covering a counter position in the fishing department.

"Jim and Carmen Rogers have been great to work for," she continued. "It's good to know if you are sick or your spouse is, you can stay home and take care of yourself or them and not have to worry about whether you will have a job when you are ready to come back to work. When I had Covid in 2022, Carmen was leaving stuff on my doorstep every day. That kind of thing really makes a difference."

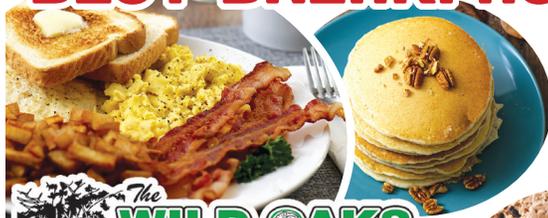
"We are like a family here. We may fuss and fight with each other a bit but then we get over it and continue on."

See 'MERRINGTON'/page 9



LCR Photo/Laura Valenti
Bonnie Merrington has worked in the Bennett Spring Park Store for nearly 30 years.

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Community fly-tying demonstrations continue on Wednesdays

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through Dec. 27.

This event will provide instruction on tying a basic fishing fly and will give participants an opportunity to visit, share stories and see the art of fly tying with experienced Bennett Spring anglers.

Those who have never tied a fly

before are welcome. Danny and Donald will demonstrate the technique and provide all items needed, although attendees are welcome to bring their own.

This demonstration is presented by the Friends of Bennett Spring State Park and is open to all ages.

The church annex building is located directly across from the park office, behind the park restaurant.

All are welcome to attend, and there is no cost.

For more information about this event, call the Bennett Spring nature center at 417-532-3925.

MERRINGTON

She continued. "Over the years, I've had a chance to meet so many people, people I work with and, of course, so many customers. Now after so many years, it is sad sometimes as the older ones pass on, but on the happier side, I've seen so many bring their kids and introduce them to fishing here. I've also watched those kids grow up and bring the next generation to Bennett Spring."

When she's not at work, Bonnie and her husband, John, have an 80 acre farm.

It is part of the farm that once belonged to her parents. And, as she added, there is always something to do on the farm —fixing fence, feeding cattle, picking up limbs or cutting brush. They also enjoy camping and fishing, often at Pomme de Terre Lake.

Bonnie has one son, Kenneth, and John has two daughters, Melissa and Alicia. Together, they have 10 grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

"We have a pontoon boat and

tubes for the kids to ride on. We enjoy camping with the family, cooking and eating together around the campfire. The campground there is like the ones here, very family-oriented."

Bonnie concluded. "Here at work, I feel needed and that is important. I can't say I felt that where I'd worked before. I feel valued here, and that makes all the difference."

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Youth art to be displayed

To celebrate Missouri Day, which falls on Oct. 18 this year, Bennett Spring State Park will host artworks made by local students Oct. 15 through Oct. 21. Works will be either of Bennett Spring State Park or of other Missouri-related items inspired by the park. Items will be on display in the nature center during regular building hours: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Wednesday through Sunday. For more information, call the nature center at 417-532-3925.



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