

When Two Paths Cross

By Chris Cooper

When Ahzjah Simons, founder of the Children's Wellness Network based out of Atlanta, Georgia, thought of the perfect place to have a camp for children she thought of Panola Mountain State Park.

She immediately called and spoke with PMSP Manager Tim Banks and PMSP Resource Manager Ranger Jody Rice, and told them her idea of collaborating together to create a one-of-a-kind camp that interacts with the children on the great outdoors and the holistic life style.

Simons, who jokingly describes herself as "a mixed up child" (Cherokee, African American, Syrian, West Indian, and Jamaican) was encouraged that Banks thought her idea a good one, especially since he had just finished reading *The Last Child In The Woods*, a book that addresses nature-deficit disorder and disconnection from nature.

Banks suggested to Simons to drive up to the PMSP's Upper Alexander Lake.

"The minute I turned the corner and saw this beautiful lake – I could feel it. *This* was huge; *this* was going to happen, almost with or without me. *This* was going to be magical and what better back drop than beautiful Panola Mountain State Park?"

Before any of *this* could happen, it would take almost a life time for Simons to recognize her calling was in the arts and not in accounting, which was her major while attending college in Connecticut. While in Connecticut, she became a member of a reggae band; and thus she started her dual life: working Monday through Friday from 9 to 5 and weekends performing. In 1996, she relocated to Atlanta due to her accounting company. This dual life continued after she had her two sons (13 and 11) and after she began an organization that supported independent artists.

After about fifteen years she found herself distributing artists products and radio promotion. Simons was and still is a community radio broadcaster, and can be heard on the radio and via website on Fridays and Mondays.

"I co-hosted a music program for awhile. I also started to get a little bit more information about holistic health. And the next thing I knew I was hosting my own radio program, featuring alternative medicine, nutrition, environment, creative expression, and everything in between."

"Alternative radio was like another college for me. My whole foundation just dropped out from under me because I started to realize your emotions do affect your physical health and there is the science behind it."

Soon, Simons turned her radio message into a print version and thus the magazine *Conscious Hue-niversal Living* was created in 2002. Then she decided to make it more interactive, by creating artistic events that would feature wellness speakers, presenters, healthy food, entertainment, and more publication – thus *Conscious Cafe* was born.

Early on, when she began the radio aspect of her career, Simons took a bold step, submitted her resignation, and started another career from scratch: part time job as accounts payable clerk at Sevananda Natural Foods Market, the only one in the southeast that is purely vegetarian. At the time her sons were getting sick from the school food and going through a slow death not only from the lack of the arts in school, but also a lack of focus on being outdoors.

"A lot of the left brain approach was being rammed down their throats in school and was kind of killing them. They had no avenue for creative expression. The fitness aspects were starting to shut down; fitness became a treat: you can go outside if you do this."

Simons met her co workers: Jen-



Ranger Rice helping a child climb a tree.

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nifer Franklin, a natural food chef for over 20 years; and Carolyn Renee, a leader in the performance arts industry for over 20 years. When she met these co-workers and now CWN partners, everything fell into place.

"This is really about connecting the dots. Jennifer brought the nutritional aspect into the Children's Wellness Network and Carolyn brings the creative arts and culture. Now we had this template and the media to share it with others."

The CWN focuses on every aspect of a child's well-being: alternate medicine, nutrition, environment, creative expression, fitness, emotional health, mental health, spiritual health, physical health, gardening, wellness, and nature.

PMSP Ranger Jody Rice learned the appreciation of nature from his family.

"Nature has always played a vital role in my life. My dad was raised out in the woods hunting, fishing, and trapping. My mother loved to go do things outside. My dad was more the wilderness adventurer. I was raised to respect nature. If you're going to cut down a tree don't cut it just to cut it; make sure you use it. If you're going to hunt make sure you use that meat and that it's not wasted. Nature is here not just for us to enjoy but also for our children's children to enjoy."

From an early age Rice went on camping trips, became a member of the Boy Scouts of America, including earning its highest award: The Eagle Scout. The appreciation of nature came to a deeper understanding when he started working for Georgia State Parks and Historical Sites in 2000.

"I started seeing how outdoor education and outdoor environments could influence individuals to actually focus and have an experience. And they are learning as they are doing it. They learn about themselves and they start to grow. It's a wonderful and beautiful thing."

Upon entering Georgia Southwestern State University, he majored in psychology with a minor in Special Education and a focus in outdoor therapy. After he received his degree, he decided that working at state parks was his career choice.

"I love being outside and restoring native eco systems; and making sure they are here for future generations. To be a steward of the lands and to work on a team effort for that appealed to me, and I went in that direction."

The home site parks Rice worked at were Black Rock Mountain State Park, the tallest state park in Georgia. It is also a gem site. "It's beautiful. You can see mountains from four different states."

While at Black Rock Mountain State Park, he worked under park manager Anthony Lampost. He then went to General Coffee State Park with Sim Davidson as the manager.

GCSP features a heritage farm, and Georgia's state reptile the gopher tortoise, which is a threatened species. Rice then worked for FDR State Park under the management of Ronnie Akins. It was at FDRSP Rice learned how to care for the American Chestnut Trees and started developing his tree climbing skills.

Rice first heard of PMSP when Akins sent him to the 1500-acre park to pick up canoes.

"PMSP was a day use park that was 18 miles south of Atlanta, GA with a focus of leading environmental education school programs. As time progress I was more intrigued to see if I could be more involved at that park."

Rice later learned PMSP was also involved with native plant restoration, getting rid of non-evasive species, and environmental education, and not just for the park's clients and customers but also other people as well.

There were other things about PMSP that attracted Rice.

The National Park Service recognizes PMSP as a National Natural Landmark due to PMSP's monadnocks, which remain untouched by man, and, as a result, consist of an eco system that has not been hindered. Because the monadnocks are in their original state it has natural solution pits, which are small areas that collect water, dead leaves and other types of material. This material eventually decays and becomes soil, and out of that soil natural plants grow. One of those plants is the rare plant called dimorpha, a red plant that blooms in the winter and produces white blossoms.

PMSP is utilized as a research station for geological studies and considered a watershed area, which also contains a natural regenerated second growth force in the area.

Probably the most fascinating thing about PMSP is that it is part of the Arabia National Heritage Area, which is recognized by the National Park Service.

Another thing that attracted Rice to PMSP was its location: it is located 18 miles south of downtown Atlanta thus it is also a metro Atlantic Park.

And finally, there is the multi-used trail (no motorized vehicles allowed) Rockdale River Trail, a concrete trail of 12.3 miles that connects seven school systems, from Stone Crest Mall to PMSP.

"This means school children can get on their bicycles and bicycle to the park where we can do our environmental education program with them. They don't have to get on the interstate."

Simons and Rice clicked right away, each having the same goals, and a love for nature and children. They collaborated on what the new camps would entail: bringing in individuals from various backgrounds with multi cultural experiences; organic farming; heirloom gadoons; the martial arts; song; dance; culinary arts; food; mammals, reptiles, and amphibians; water quality; literary arts; healing arts; canoeing; fishing; hiking; primitive skills; and tree climbing.

"We are mingling both of our resources together to form a holistic camp that encompasses all of those things and instead of working against each other they work for each other." Rice said.

On June 14, CWN and PMSP collaborated on Funfest at Cator Woolford Gardens, which introduced the community to a living and breathing example of the holistic lifestyle via exhibits representing every aspect of living: the mind, the body, the soul, nutrition,



Ahzjah Simons

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creative expression, nature, fitness, cooking demos, education on eco systems, etc.

"It's really exciting. The collaboration is awesome. We have similar ideas. I've never seen a camp that had a recreational program with what they are doing. They also talked about mimicking this camp with five other state parks." Simons said.

Perhaps the number one thing that is a hit with the children is the tree climbing, which was developed in the 1980s. It is a rope-assisted-technical-tree-climbing. Rice is a qualified tree-climbing instructor by Tree Climbing USA.

This type of tree climbing is not evasive and does not harm the Naomi Ruth Tree (a 250-year-old and 90-foot high Southern Red Oak named after Rice's wife) to access the tree branches, some of them up to 35 feet long. The individual, wearing a helmet, uses a special climbing system that connects in a rope and a harness. This type of tree climbing is also handicapped accessible.

"We hook them on rope and their movements start to progress and after a while they'll start to sit on the limb, then stand on the limb, walk on the limb. I've actually had people fall asleep up there."

Their ropes are at a 45-degree angle, they get close to the tree, and, at the count of three, raise both legs in the air, swing outward 45 to 50 feet, pendulum back, land on the branch, catch their breath, and say to Ranger Rice: "I want to do that again!"

The tree climbers learn to view trees as beautiful, good, healthy and they learn about trust: trust in a higher power; themselves; others; nature; and gear and equipment.

Simons, who viewed this type of tree climbing for the first time, was in awe: "There was a glow around the tree. The children were climbing and laughing. They had never done this before. They were just hanging; some of them were upside down. It was amazing. It was something really magical."

"As a kid, I wanted to be a mountain man that went out like Lewis and Clark, find new things, live off the land, meet indigenous tribes that no other one has seen before, go to places that probably only a bird flew to."

It could be said that at PMSP Rice is finally able to be all of those things. Rice now makes his home with his wife Naomi (also a nature lover) on the grounds of PMSP, where beautiful mixed pine and hardwood trees can be seen from the living room window.

"Georgia has 63 state parks and historic sites. Each one is different. Each one has it's own character – it's own caliber. Our parks range from the mountains to the sea. All of them offer something different to enjoy and love."

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