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NEWS

Take a hike: Local trail club celebrates 50 years strong

By Caitlyn Burchett

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The Tidewater Appalachian Trail Club hosted a tree planting at Olde Mill Run Park in Chesapeake on Nov. 5, 2022, in honor of its 50th anniversary. The club set a goal of planting 50 trees for the day out of its total goal of 500. (Billy Schuerman/The Virginian-Pilot)

In most circumstances, being told to “take a hike” might elicit a scowl.

But taking a hike — and encouraging others to put on their walking boots — is what the Tidewater Appalachian Trail Club is all about.

While the club was started in 1972 to help maintain a portion of the Appalachian Trail around 200 miles away, members do a lot of work locally. The club made a pact at the start of 2022 to plant 500 saplings to honor the club’s 50th anniversary as part of a broader effort to maintain trails and parks in Hampton Roads.

Nearly two-dozen members of the Tidewater Appalachian Trail Club gathered on a recent November morning at a Chesapeake park to plant 72 trees, making a dent in their goal.

But the tree plantings serve another purpose: connecting with a fresh generation of potential members who will hopefully keep the club going for another 50 years.

Surveying the scene at Olde Mill Run Park, 74-year-old John Oakes tugged off a dirty glove, lifted his hat and wiped the sweat from his brow. A blue bandana almost hid what is left of his silvery hair — a characteristic most members share, aside from a few outliers.



From left: Paul Hermann, Faye Bailey and Laura Bontems work to plant a tree at Olde Mill Run Park in Chesapeake on Nov. 5, 2022. The Tidewater Appalachian Trail Club hosted a tree planting in honor of its 50th anniversary. (Billy Schuerman/The Virginian-Pilot)

“This is the predominant hair color and the predominant amount of hair in the Tidewater Appalachian Trail Club,” Oakes said with a laugh as he motioned to his head.

The Tidewater Appalachian Trail Club was formed by 22 hiking enthusiasts, established to manage a 10-mile stretch — from Reids Gap to the Tye River — of the more than 2,000-mile-long trail. Today, the club is 500 members strong, about half of whom regularly attend trail maintenance events throughout the year. Trail maintenance can be anything from picking up trash to clearing a fallen tree from a path to widening a trail.

“The Appalachian Trail would not exist without volunteers, and we need to continue to preserve it,” said Oakes, who has been a member since 2000.

While some members travel around 200 miles from Hampton Roads to their section of the trail five times per year, others maintain local trails and parks, including those at First Landing State Park, False Cape State Park, New Quarter Park and Sandy Bottom Nature Park. The club is also responsible for establishing dozens of trails at area parks, including within York County’s New Quarter, and in the Back Bay and Great Dismal Swamp national wildlife refuges.

Oakes — and many members who gathered at Olde Mill Run Park to plant a variety of young pines, oaks and crepe myrtles — joined the club after stumbling upon a two-sentence advertisement in *The Virginian-Pilot*. “Tidewater Appalachian Trail Club. Hiking, canoeing and other outdoor activities across Virginia, including the Peninsula,” it read.

Reese Lukei came across a similar advertisement in 1973. Having officially joined the club in 1974, the 84-year-old is the club’s longest serving member. At the time he joined, Lukei was the scout master of his son’s Boy Scout troop and thought it was a great opportunity to “get the boys out in nature.”

“My little venture to take the scouts up to the Appalachian Trail turned into quite a bit more of an adventure,” Lukei said with a laugh.

More recently, the club has taken to advertising online — something that caught the interest of 37-year-old Britt Collins.

“We have guys in their 60s and 70s learning how to use Facebook for the first time. They really are making an effort to reach younger crowds with families,” said Collins, one of the club’s youngest members by at least two decades.

Collins said she thinks the biggest challenge in attracting younger generations is convincing them the club activities are not a big commitment nor an obligation they have to make time for.

“My generation thinks it is hard to get involved unless they are single or don’t have kids, but we need to get people to see its a fun event that you can do with your family and friends,” Collins said.

She said if people volunteer just once, they might find themselves hooked on nature like she did.

“When you get out there, there is no service, so you are not constantly checking your phone. You are not worrying about what is happened in the outside world,” Collins said. “You just submit to nature.”

The recent tree planting was one of many to be announced as part of the multiyear effort.

“Turns out, planting the trees is the easy part. Finding locations, identifying the right types of trees and securing trees has been the most challenging part,” said John Barnes, the club’s outreach chair.

During the first planting, which took place in February at Norfolk’s Legacy Grove at Ocean View Elementary School, 65 trees were put in the ground.

While Olde Mill Run Park backs up to a wooded area that is part of the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, the neighborhood park itself had very few trees. But the recent tree planting will ensure in the coming years, the park’s pavilion won’t be the only thing offering shade to those playing on the playground or tossing a ball in the open field.

By the end of the day, the club members were drenched in sweat and dirt-stained from lugging bags of mulch over their shoulders and toting shovels around.

Oakes stood with his hands on his hips as he looked around at the club’s work.

“I am not a sit by the beach sipping margaritas type of guy,” Oakes said with a laugh. “I want to go out and work hard. I want to sweat; I want to do something worth while.”

The day’s tree planting was more than worth while, he said.

“Local trails and parks are a jewel in an urban area. It gives people a taste of the forest in the middle of a city,” Oakes said. “For kids who grow up in a suburban neighborhood, walking on an unimproved trail where they have to climb up and down hills, they get their feet sandy or crush pine cones — it is a totally different experience. And we make the trails accessible.”

While most of the club’s activities wind down for the winter, those interested in learning more can attend meetings the second Wednesday of each month. The meetings are held from 7-9 p.m. at the Episcopal Church of the Advent, located at 9629 Norfolk Ave. in Norfolk.

Caitlyn Burchett, caitlyn.burchett@virginiamedia.com