

# A Matter of Trust

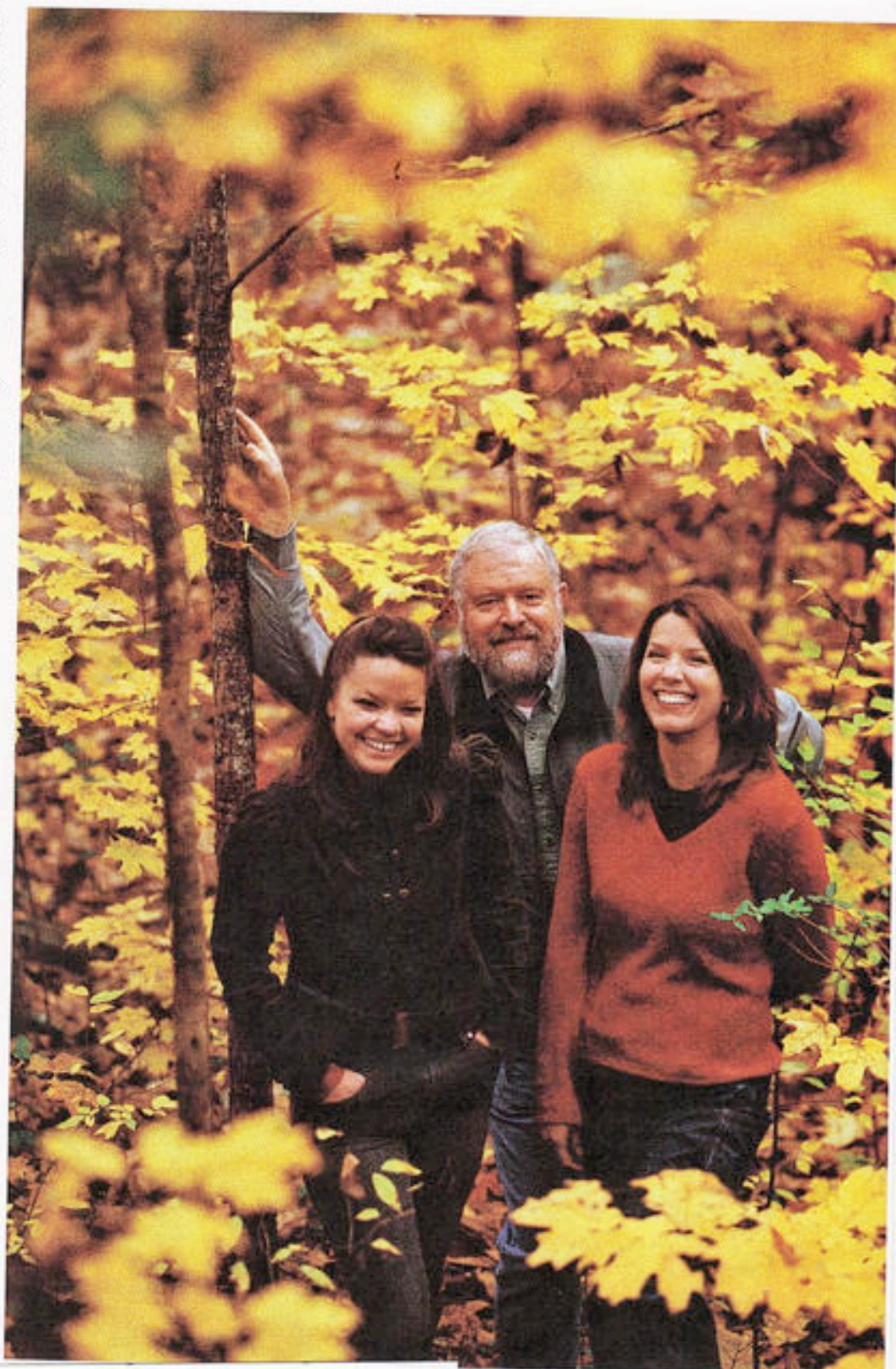
*The conservationists behind the Tennessee River Gorge cleanup ensure the land's survival for the next generation.*

**C**risp, cool air greets the rough-clad volunteers as they climb the steep hillside with tools and work gloves in hand. Ablaze with fiery color, the vivid autumn scene almost masks the heaps of ugly junk that mar the landscape. But not even Mother Nature's exquisite palette can obliterate a dilapidated Winnebago plunked unceremoniously in the woods.

"If you look at this," says James "Jim" Brown, referring to the old RV shell, a rusty refrigerator, rotting mattresses, and other piles of debris, "you would think we had never done anything." He laughs and then patiently turns back to today's tasks for the Tennessee River Gorge Trust—continued cleanup of a decades-old junkyard that blights the riverfront.

As director of the Chattanooga-based conservation group, Jim and the staff—business and development director Julie Beach and administrative assistant Moriah Salter—know it takes slow and steady work to see results. The all-volunteer committee and board realize it as well. Many of them pitch in today, as they have time and time again during the organization's 25-plus-year history.

The motivated team has already removed cars, house trailers, tires, and loads of trash from this site. "There was a tanker trailer here, wasn't there, Sam?" asks Hale Booth, longtime board member. "Yeah, lying here on the side of the river," replies Sam Powell,



Moriah Salter (left), Jim Brown, and Julie Beach work closely to protect Tennessee's Grand Canyon.





ABOVE: More than 16,000 of the 27,000 acres in the river canyon and surrounding areas have become protected since the trust's work began. RIGHT: Baylor School sits at the mouth of the gorge, and conservation is often the topic of classes held outdoors.

group founder. "The asphalt it was carrying had coagulated."

"This was the most unsightly place in the whole river gorge," agrees Jim. "That's why we took it on."

#### **To Protect, Educate, and Steward**

With time, this woeful spot will sparkle with the same pristine luster as much of the rest of the gorge, some 27,000 acres of land carved by 26 miles of the Tennessee River through the Cumberland Mountains.

"Twenty minutes and a million miles away" aptly describes this slice of wilderness a short drive from downtown Chattanooga. "You have this amazing contrast between the urban area and—boom—all this wilderness. They are side by side," says Jim.

"We've protected a little more than half of it—16,000 acres," he continues. "We're conserving a resource for our



community, but we're not locking it up. The gorge is here for people to use. We hope to connect the greenways of Chattanooga to the river gorge. You wouldn't have to travel to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. You could be right here in town and yet spend days in undeveloped wilderness area. Not many cities can offer that."

#### **Learning About the Land**

Another project of the trust involves Baylor School, a prep school located at the mouth of the gorge.

"The concept of a land trust is one that we've studied in class," says Baylor teacher Dawn Richards. Today, she and her environmental science students hold class at the Williams Island Ferry site on campus.





**“This land is handed down from generation to generation. [The residents] are tied to it emotionally.”**

Julie Beach, business and development director of the Tennessee River Gorge Trust

“The fact that in our backyard we can look out and see the product of a trust is remarkable to us,” Dawn says.

In a few hours, another group of Baylor students will head to the Harriet Tubman Housing Development’s One Room Schoolhouse. There, the teens and Henry G. “Rardy” Spratt, Jr., a UTC professor, will meet with elementary children from the area. “We want to get our message out to the younger schoolkids,” says Rardy, a trust board member. Lessons about conservation are part of the Baylor outreach tutoring program. In time, the kids’ efforts will be rewarded with a field trip to the Pot Point House, a restored cabin called the “crown jewel” of the gorge. For some of the

LEFT: Former intern Ana Metaxas returns to help with the cleanup. ABOVE, LEFT: Chandler Dillon walks along the gorge’s Bill Holmberg Trail for the visually impaired. BELOW: Textures and aromas along the trail entice youngster Katie Kilgore.



children, the river canyon trip will represent their first outing beyond the inner city.

### **Balancing Act**

As it has since it first started, the trust remains fiercely devoted to staying above political fray. Membership falls fairly evenly between political parties with everyone pulling together toward common goals.

Jack Kruesi, the current president jokes about how he makes a living; he’s a land developer. “But I’ve always had an interest in conservation,” he says. “I’ve been on the board for 10 years and believe in what we’re doing.”

The organization strives for a deeper relationship with longtime residents of the gorge. “They’re our neighbors,” says Julie. “The land has been in their family forever. They are tied to it emotionally.”

For Jack and all the dedicated folks with the Tennessee River Gorge Trust it’s that simple. “We respect people’s love of land and what it means to them,” he says.

NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON

**For more information:** Visit [www.trgt.org](http://www.trgt.org).



### **A Special Path**

A Tennessee River Gorge outing also represents a new experience for visually impaired students from the Hamilton County school system. Accompanied by parents and instructors, the children take in the wonders of nature through the thoughtfully designed Bill Holmberg Trail near the Pot Point House. Aromatic and textured plants provoke lively comments and huge smiles from the kids.