

Newest Kids in Parks Trail opens at Altapass

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Hazel Bueno of Bakersville visits the newest Kids in Parks TRACK Trail at the Orchard at Altapass, dressed as a pollinator. / Karen Chávez/KChavez@CITIZEN-TIMES.com



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SPRUCE PINE — Apples just have a way of making people happy. Even in a year when the apple crop is as bad as the current one, Bill Carson thought, there's just something special about apples.

As the co-owner with his sister, Kit Carson Trubey, of the Orchard at Altapass in the Mitchell County area of the Blue Ridge Parkway, Carson has seen the joy that people get picking apples in early fall, riding the hay wagon through the orchard, sipping muscadine cider on the barn's back porch or listening to live bluegrass music with King luscious trees as backdrop.

But he wanted to spread the apple love a little more.



Members of the Gressel Family take a hike Saturday on the new Eric Gressel Memorial Trail, part of the new Blue Ridge Parkway's Kids in Parks TRACK Trail at the Orchard at Altapass. / Karen Chávez/KChavez@CITIZEN-TIMES.com

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"When we took possession of the orchard in 1995, we were afraid if we didn't buy it, it would get developed," said Carson, who retired with his wife, Judy Carson, to Western North Carolina from his previous life as a rocket scientist.

Trubey and the Carsons bought 280 acres to preserve the scenic beauty and heritage, eventually selling half to the parkway. The 144-acre Orchard at Altapass, which has operated as a working apple orchard for more than 100 years, is continued by the family and the nonprofit Altapass Foundation.

"We started off thinking we wanted to take the next step for people to enjoy the orchard in new ways," Carson said. "Even when the orchard is closed, we wanted people to be able to come and enjoy it."

So started the birth of a trail system, which coincided serendipitously with the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation's Kids in Parks program, looking to expand its network of kid-friendly hiking trails along the 469-mile parkway corridor.

Last weekend, the hybrid product of the orchard and the parkway foundation debuted as the newest Kids in Parks TRACK Trail (Trails, Ridges and Active, Caring Kids) at the Orchard at Altapass.

The TRACK "trail" is a combination of any of eight miles of trails that wander through the hillside orchard framed mouthwatering panorama of the Blue Ridge Mountains, as well as the very short Butterfly Garden Trail.

A kiosk at the entrance to the orchard, which sits just a few miles north of the parkway's Mineral Museum, has free brochures for kids, families and other passers-by to take at any time to help lead them in a educational nature guided stroll.

Hazel Bueno, 3, her brother, Odin Bueno, 5, and their parents, Thor and Jennifer Bueno, of Bakersville, were on hand at the ribbon-cutting Saturday to check out the new trails.

Dressed as “a pollinator,” Hazel helped local outdoor educator Amy Weinmeister to explain the life cycle of a butterfly on a walk to the Butterfly Garden, while other children pretended to be insects or picked up apples off the ground nearby.

“We love coming here to the orchard. We love the apples and the music and the traditional clogging,” said Jennifer Bueno, a glassblower in Penland. “We’ve been here a bunch and want to keep coming again. The trail makes it really nice. We love to take our kids outdoors on the weekends.”

Getting kids out the door

The Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation began the Kids in Parks Initiative three years ago in a collaboration with the Blue Ridge Parkway and the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of N.C. Foundation to promote children’s health by engaging them in outdoor adventures that increase physical activity and foster a meaningful connection to the natural and cultural world.

The first TRACK Trail was established as the Blue Ridge Parkway Visitor Center on a portion of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail. Since then, four more, including the orchard, have been installed along the parkway, and more than 25 have been installed at parks across Western North Carolina, including Chimney Rock State Park, and have even expanded to South Dakota.

“We’re trying to address childhood obesity and nature deficit disorder,” Urroz said at the trail dedication ceremony. “Kids are more plugged into cell phones, TVs and computers than they are to the outdoors world around them. We’re doing something to make a hike fun and active, to give them a choice to cut down on videos.”

TRACK trails allow children to register for free online, track their hiking progress and earn prizes for reaching goals.

While always scouting out new places for a self-guided TRACK Trail, Urroz said he was enchanted by the idea of having one at the orchard, one of his favorite places on the parkway. At the same time, the Altapass Foundation was seeking out ways to fund a trail system.

The orchard received grants of \$8,500 from the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area, \$5,000 from Progress Energy and \$4,000 from the Eric Gressel Family, Carson said. Gressel was a longtime volunteer at the orchard who passed away last year from cancer.

The grants allowed for trail signs and brochures and designing a trail system that winds and blends with the orchard, passes historic sites such as graves and railroad tracks, passes into a shady forest and crosses streams. They are known as the Eric L. Gressel Memorial Trails.

Family members came from several states away for the dedication, including grandson Eric Gressel, of Raleigh, who hiked a two-mile trail with wife, Randi. It was their first time at the orchard. "He lived in Sandford, but he came here all the time," grandson Gressel said, impressed with the trail layout through the stunning scenery. "We can see why he loved it here. This is something he would be proud of."

Now not only apple pickers, but children and their families looking for a gentle outdoor adventure can visit the orchard at any time, pick up a self-guided TRACK Trail brochure and search for butterflies, landmarks or Virginia beauty apples.

The orchard also has a lunch cart through September, a gift shop with locally made jams and cider, hay rides and live music.

"Our mission is to preserve the history, heritage and culture of the Blue Ridge Mountains," Bill Carson said. "I believe this project showcases all the 'good stuff' the orchard offers."