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PHOTOS BY TAMMY CURTIS

Latest Mis-Adventure proves most challenging to date



Blanchard Springs guide D.J. Binnie (top photo) explains cave formations to 10-year-old Cayden Brock of Mountain Home during the Wild Cave Tour last week. Above, Aulanda McFarland makes her way through a narrow portion of the cave.

By ANGELIA ROBERTS
Executive Director of Ad/Ed

Coveralls. ☒
Hard hats. ☒
Knee pads. ☒
Gloves. ☒
Lights. ☒

Toss in some bottled water, snacks and a good-for-photos-only cellphone, and we were ready for our biggest mis-adventure challenge to date.

Here, far below ground, we would be forced to overcome any fears of being claustrophobic, heights and getting used to the expanse of darkness that would surround us.

The decision to do the Blanchard

Springs Wild Cave Tour had been on my bucket list for some time. As usual, I had conned Aulanda McFarland along to share the pain and promised Tammy Curtis a great story for her publication, as well.

We were excited, but apprehensive. The next four hours were going to be grueling.

Guiding the way

D.J. Binnie would be guiding us on this journey and he gave us a quick list of “dos and don’ts.”

In addition to the three of us, Cayden Brock, who was celebrating his 10th birthday, was accompanied by his father and uncle.

While Cayden could barely contain his excitement, the rest of us were a

little more reserved, not knowing what we were getting into.

The bus took us to the main entrance where we descended seven flights of stairs below the surface to the Grand Canyon Room. It was soon evident this was not the popular Dripstone or Discovery Trail tourist trip with lighted paths or paved walkways.

Our headlamps gave us the necessary light, but there was the overpowering feel of how small we were in the vast canyon that seemed to stretch to infinity like a “Star Trek” opening scene.

A heavy-duty cable led us even farther into the depths and would come in handy when we had to pull ourselves back out.

Water rushed from a nearby stream or underground river.

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Prosecutor talks death penalty, prison overcrowding, marijuana

By JOSEPH PRICE
Guard Staff Writer

The death penalty is, to some extent, society’s self defense, according Holly Meyer, 16th Judicial District Prosecuting Attorney.

Meyer spoke to the Batesville Rotary Club at Monday’s meeting at Kelley Wyatt’s Restaurant about her job as a prosecutor and shared her thoughts on medical marijuana and prison overcrowding. She also shared the story of her death sentence case, which will see resolution in a couple of weeks.

So what is the 16th District?

“It’s five counties,” Meyer said. “Independence, Fulton, Izard, Stone and Cleburne. That’s a really big district. To travel from the Missouri line down to Quitman is a 2½-hour drive.”

Meyer said she is assisted by eight deputy prosecutors. She said there is a district court in every county as well as a circuit court for major felony cases. They also cover juvenile, probate and civil courts.

“Between all that, there’s probably 12 judges we’re keeping track of,” Meyer said.

Before Meyer became a prosecutor, she worked in a private practice. She also worked with the Department of Human Services.

Meyer said she also hired a victim-assistance coordinator. She said the coordinator helps victims of violent crime navigate the criminal system. This ranges from preparing for hearings to applying for criminal reparations from the state. Coordinators also explain the punishment that the perpetrator will receive.

Meyer was deputy prosecuting attorney for both Stone and Cleburne counties. She’s also been a senior prosecutor in Pulaski County.

Ledelle Lee

It was Pulaski County where Meyer would work on what is probably her most high-profile case.

Meyer prosecuted Ledelle Lee, one of the two

SEE MEYER, PAGE A2



JOSEPH PRICE

District Prosecutor Holly Meyer spoke about the area’s drug and the state’s prison overcrowding issues at the Monday meeting of the Batesville Rotary Club at Kelley Wyatt’s Restaurant on. She said that whenever there is a case that involves the selling of drugs, she wants someone to go to jail.



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WILD CAVE (CONTINUED FROM PAGE A1)



PHOTOS BY TAMMY CURTIS

Alan Brock, followed by his brother Paul Brock, who live near Springfield, Missouri, bring up the rear of the six-person team that explored the Wild Cave at Blanchard Springs. Below, Aulanda McFarland is one of the first ones to reach the bottom after sliding down a large wall in the canyon.

Massive rocks took us upward and onward in the maze of hidden trails that only our guide had knowledge of where they would lead.

Not too long into our adventure, we stopped to rob our backpacks of some much needed water. Most of us were already hot, sweaty and thirsty. We had been advised on the proper attire to be comfortable and we were already wishing we had made even lighter clothing choices.

My two compadres weren't saying anything yet, but I could already read their minds. They were both thinking: *Why did we let her talk us into this?!*

The Hokey Pokey

There is an art form to maneuvering through the cave and D.J. was constantly explaining exactly how and where to place our hands and, more importantly, our feet.

It was like doing the Hokey Pokey: You put your right foot in, you put your right foot out, you put your right foot in and you shake it all about.

"Do not cross your feet here or you can fall," he told us more than once.

Other times, it was, "Knee pads in place," before we crawled through portals in order to reach our next destination.

Many of them had names and it was obvious why when D.J. offered us a one-at-a-time look into the I'll Miss You Hole.

The Ham Sandwich required us to crawl single-file through the tunnel, and the Meat Grinder felt like an unpleasant mammogram, which was more painful for some of us than others. The Subway was a piece of cake allowing us to walk upright without any obstacles, but that was short-lived.

At the Razorback's Spine, which looked exactly like the backbone of the well-loved football mascot, we had to walk with our feet side by side and place our hands in a fist position with thumbs up inside a parallel rock to get to the other side.

Numerous times we had to sit, slide and crawl.

At each obstacle, D.J. showed us exactly what we needed to do in order to get past it and move on to the next.

Cayden, who was taking a day off from his fourth-grade class at Hacker Elementary in Mountain Home, didn't seem to fear any of the obstacles and had labeled us the "camera crew." He was excited about traveling with the media, but after listening to



TAMMY CURTIS

our moans and groans followed by, "I'm not sure I can do that," he told us, "You camera people are so dramatic."

Lights out

Inside the expansive cave the only light was the guide's lone flashlight and our headlamps that cast shadows against the rocks and formations.

At one location, D.J. instructed us all to sit, turn off our headlamps and listen.

We sat in complete darkness and listened but the rushing water drowned out the desired effect he had hoped for. D.J. explained that people usually claim to hear adult and children's voices.

At our next stop, the silence gave way to

real or imagined voices, the laughter of children and the feeling that the seven of us were not alone.

It was spiritual and eerie at the same time. Our guide told us that one group of people were so disturbed by it that they demanded to leave.

But the spirit world would not deter this group or the knowledge that in 1955, explorers discovered a 1,000-year-old Native American skeleton in the cave with a fractured skull, ribs and leg.

Most of the cave was untouched from those who had explored it, but one small plaque had been in place since 1960 where some Boy Scouts had spent the night.

We stopped for lunch and were told we were at the halfway point, and the second

part would be even more taxing.

Hot and more than a little tired from all the huffing and puffing, we were glad for the much-needed break.

Aulanda, who wasn't finding that much joy in this particular mis-adventure, asked, "Next time can't we just do a concert or a dinner theater?"

Fear factors

Some places were really confining, while others fell into the danger zone.

One small opening, called the Birth Canal, required going through head first and slowly wiggling the body upward to the next level.

"It's a boy," D.J. yelled when Cayden was successful in getting through.

After a couple of epic fails, I knew to take the alternate route.

Tammy had already opted for Plan B, which was coincidentally named the C-Section. It required pulling yourself up and onto an opening that was so narrow one had to inch through.

It was a tight fit and I kept the soles of her hiking boots in sight.

Everyone else followed suit, except D.J., who had the Birth Canal down to an art.

Neither Tammy nor Aulanda had complained much about being claustrophobic and were too busy keeping one foot in front of the other.

Aulanda said she actually felt safer in the tight spaces than she did out in the open.

My fear came into play while in mid-air on a ledge, but thankfully there were places to hold onto. Thinking I had mastered the worst was premature when D.J. explained there were no handholds at Death's Ledge.

"Just lean into the rock and scoot your feet along the edge," he said.

Looking down at the jagged rocks was my first real fear of death and I froze.

Aulanda and Tammy had gone before me, but I was stuck to the rock formation with the knowledge that I was going to die right there.

It was unlike any fear I had ever experienced.

Going back was not an option, nor was moving forward.

My feet were cemented in place and my entire body was terror-stricken. So many things were running through my mind and I could hear my four adult kids complaining at my funeral about how I was too old to be pulling such shenanigans.

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WILD CAVE (CONTINUED FROM PAGE A7)



PHOTOS BY TAMMY CURTIS

Seeing my fear, D.J. calmly said, “It’s all in your head.”

It was my “Come to Jesus moment,” and my prayer of not wanting to die was answered when I felt D.J.’s hand guide my foot and I was able to move forward.

Back on solid ground, everyone was told to sit and slide down the large dirt embankment that seemed to spiral downward forever.

Landing on my backside never felt so good.

Lessons learned

A couple of live bats hung on the ceilings and other dead ones were taped off in order for us to see how well preserved they were in the confines of the cave. Cayden spied a colorful salamander, which looked strangely out of place among the gray rocks and dirt floor.

At times we stopped while D.J. explained how the stalagmites and other formations were made, and as time wore on we were getting to know a little more about each other.

D.J. had grown up in Stone and Izard counties. The grandson of Pat Cash (aka “Aunt Minnie”), he had been roped into her comedy show as a child and spent countless hours at Blanchard Springs, where his mother worked.

He developed a love for history and geology of the area, so when a job opening came available, he jumped at the chance to follow his passion.

The acoustics made wonderful sounds when D.J. touched some of the cave’s formations, but no one seemed to appreciate the lyrics of “Coal Miner’s Daughter” when Tammy and I sang it.

After almost four hours inside the bowels of the mammoth cave, we had come full circle.

The yellow cable signified the near end of our spelunking adventure and getting out would require the use of our already sore

arms and shoulders to hoist ourselves up and out of the cave.

Tammy was halfway up the steep embankment when a flying rock hit her in the face, causing her to fall and hold onto the cable to keep from sliding back down.

Before that, we had only minor slips and falls and everyone had recovered quickly.

After we all reached the top, our tour ended at the Titans.

The final look before we left was spectacular and D.J. reminded us: You are now all cavers.

Two thumbs up

It was over.

We looked like 40 miles of bad road, and our adrenaline was still flowing — mostly from our mouths and not our bodies.

Rehashing what we liked and didn’t like was going to be decided over a late lunch.

Our bodies were already screaming in pain, and Tammy was still aching from her rock incident.

We were nasty, tired and above all, pretty darn proud of ourselves.

There is a reason it’s aptly named the Wild Cave Tour.

It wasn’t without some scary and downright dangerous moments with no harnesses, ropes or safety nets and it was a real test of our strength, weakness and fortitude.

Tammy and I gave it two thumbs up and would do it again, but Aulanda gave us an “Absolutely not!”

We’ve got plenty of other mis-adventures planned and it’s possible there is a “yee-haw” trail ride in the near future.

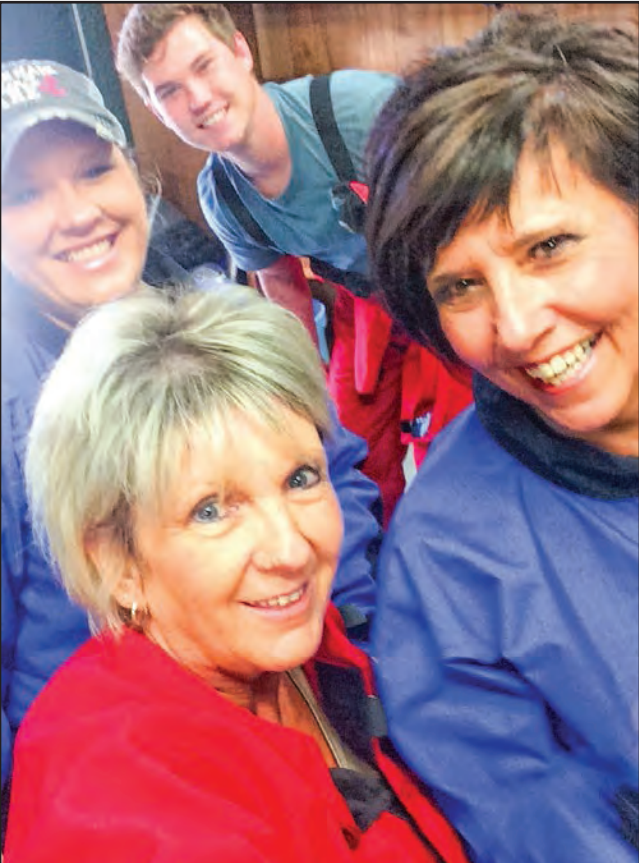
Did I mention I’m terrified of horses?

Plus, there is a dinner theater somewhere that requires high heels, nice clothes and makeup calling our names.

For more information about the Wild Cave Tour call Blanchard Springs Caverns at 870-757-2211.



Blanchard Springs guide D.J. Bennie pulls himself through one of the smallest openings in the cave called the Birth Canal while Angelia Roberts (middle photo) waits her turn to descend into a narrow opening. A good portion of the four-hour tour involved climbing (bottom left). Bennie “photobombs” a selfie before the mis-adventure event begins with Angelia Roberts, Tammy Curtis and Aulanda McFarland. Roberts keeps a tight grip on Bennie (bottom right) as she looks deep down into the “I’ll Miss You Hole.”



ANGELIA ROBERTS



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