VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT: RALPH DUHARTE

FOOTPRINT Magazine

Spring/Summer 2019 Volume 36 Issue 1

Passing the Blaze
David Waldrop Takes the Torch
Building Alaqua Bridge
The Florida Trail’s Newest and Longest Suspension Bridge
Creativity In Nature

Florida Trail Association
SOUTH FLORIDA REGIONAL CONFERENCE
A Regional Gathering of Hikers

DEC. 13-15, 2019
Tanah Keeta Scout Camp in Jupiter, FL

Hiking, camping, workshops and more! For more information, contact Paul Cummings: cummingsps@att.net
5  Passing The Blaze
The Torch Changes Hands
by David Waldrop

6  Building The Alaqua Bridge
by Adam Fryska

12 Creativity in Nature
by Alex Stigliano

17 Artist-in-Residence Program
by Kelly Wiener

20 Gateway Community Spotlight
Okeechobee
by Halle Goldstein

22 Ralph Duharte
Volunteer Spotlight
by Van Tran

34 Deborah Lynn Thompson
Keystone Heights Artist
by Jeff Glenn

Cover photo: The Alaqua bridge opens for hikers.

Our Mission
The Florida Trail Association builds, maintains, protects, and promotes the unique Florida National Scenic Trail (Florida Trail), along with a network of hiking trails throughout the state of Florida. Together with our partners, the Association provides opportunities for the public to contribute to meaningful volunteer work, engage in outdoor recreation, and participate in environmental education.
OUR MAGAZINE
The Footprint is published by the Florida Trail Association, a volunteer-based nonprofit organization focused on Florida hiking and trail building. Since 1966, the primary mission of our organization has been the care and protection of the Florida Trail, a 1,300-mile footpath across the Sunshine State - Florida's own National Scenic Trail.

OUR GOAL
To provide outreach to our readers through informative articles that express appreciation for and conservation of the natural beauty of Florida; to inform our readers of Florida Trail Association business; and to provide information on Florida hiking and outdoor recreation opportunities.

CONTRIBUTORS
Contributors are welcome to submit items for our various departments as well as trail and association-related news. Please contact the editor at communications@floridatrail.org to discuss ideas for feature stories prior to submission.
Hello. Allow me to introduce myself. To those members who have not yet met me, my name is David Waldrop and I am the new President of the Florida Trail Association. I have been a member of the Heartland Chapter of the FTA since 2005. One of my first experiences was a trail maintenance event, where I was given a mower, pointed down the trail and told to mow the edge of the trail down and back. I was hooked and attended all of the trail maintenance events the Heartland Chapter led. I did not attend hikes or chapter meetings for the first few years, but if trail maintenance was involved, I was there. I became a section leader and eventually became the Heartland Chapter Chair. I started attending state conferences, trail coordinator meetings and chapter council meetings where my passion for the overall organization took hold. In 2015, I joined the Board as a Director and then shortly thereafter, became VP of Trails. And now, I have accepted the position of President. I have trail maintenance in my blood and look forward to working with everyone to further the mission of the organization which is:

“The Florida Trail Association builds, maintains, protects, and promotes the unique Florida National Scenic Trail (Florida Trail), along with a network of hiking trails throughout the state of Florida. Together with our partners, the Association provides opportunities for the public to contribute to meaningful volunteer work, engage in outdoor recreation, and participate in environmental education.”

Volunteers created this organization in 1966, and they continue to be the heart and soul of the group. But our membership base is not getting any younger, with many notable members having passed away in recent years. This is one of the largest challenges we face- how to bring in new, fresh faces to take over the trail maintenance and stewardship that will sustain the organization and the Florida Trail. We have a dedicated trail staff who work tirelessly to find ways to close the dreaded road walks that everyone hates. They work with the chapters to bring more people out to maintenance events and provide a yearly skills training for people interested in but unsure of what is involved in trail maintenance. Chapters lead hikes, paddles, trail maintenance and the occasional bike ride to help bring new people out to learn about our wonderful organization.

So, what am I looking to accomplish during my term as President? Realistically, much the same as my predecessor. I want to hire a highly qualified, professional Executive Director to lead our organization. This person would help raise necessary funds for outreach, development and continued growth and would also be a major cheerleader for our organization—representing us to state/federal legislators, other like-minded environmental groups, and the general public that mostly doesn’t even know we exist.

Another goal will be to visit each chapter by attending a chapter meeting. This will be a big challenge for me as I must work around my day job, but it is one I look forward to doing over the course of my presidency.

And the last major goal—to complete the trail. I am pretty sure I won’t see this happen during my time as President, but we are making great strides with every mile we remove from a road walk.

Thanks, and hope to see you out on the Florida Trail!
This spring, FTA volunteers from the Choctawhatchee Chapter—working side-by-side with the US Forest Service (USFS) and our bridge building partner, Framing Our Community, Inc.—concluded work on one of the Panhandle region’s biggest infrastructure projects to date, an impressive 70-foot suspension bridge over Alaqua Creek. Building this bridge was a tremendous challenge. Alaqua Creek is located in a remote corner of the Eglin Reservation, far from any trailheads or major road crossings. Several sensitive military sites are located nearby, and access along Eglin’s range roads is often restricted. The construction itself was complex and time-consuming; the work took up much of the Choctawhatchee’s last two field seasons, with volunteers logging hundreds of hours in all of the tough conditions that Florida can dish out. Their dedication has paid off, and next season’s hikers will now enjoy a safe and accessible crossing on a stunning new bridge.

Alaqua Creek is located a little over 4 miles west of the Eglin Portal Trailhead along Highway 331 on the eastern boundary of Eglin Reservation. The creek has historically been a challenging crossing for the Florida Trail—high banked, potentially deep, and with a swift current. Hikers encountering Alaqua during periods of flooding were forced to choose between wading through dangerous chest-deep water, or taking a long road walk detour up to Bob Sikes Road and bypassing the entire 13 mile Alaqua section—one of the most scenic and interesting sections of the Florida Trail within Eglin.

For many years, the Alaqua crossing was well-served by a log bridge crossing installed by the Choctawhatchee Chapter. The log crossing was affectionately known as the Demon Bridge, in reference to the fiendish difficulties encountered in transporting the log to the site and putting it into place. Unfortunately, the Demon Bridge was eventually damaged by...
flooding and storms, and in 2015, trail maintainers were forced to remove the log crossing entirely. The remnants were sent floating downstream, and the trail was rerouted back to the original ford. At this point, the FTA, USFS, Framing Our Community (FOC), and Jackson Guard—the natural resources managers at Eglin—began exploring options for a more permanent solution, and ultimately plans were drawn up for a major suspension bridge project. With a rugged design built to withstand the severe storms that regularly impact our region, this new sturdy structure would guarantee a safe crossing for many years to come, even during high water events.

adjoining private property, including sections along several steep and eroded hillsides. A 75' temporary suspension bridge was also constructed across Alaqua to allow the crews to quickly and safely access both banks of the creek. Meanwhile, portions of the bridge structure itself were constructed off-site, to be delivered to Alaqua for final assembly.

With all of these challenges behind them, the Choctawhatchee volunteers finally began working side-by-side with FOC on the long and intricate process of assembling the bridge. In March of last year, the concrete trucks were successfully brought to the site using the newly constructed roads. Foundations were poured, anchors installed, and soon, the massive suspension bridge towers were raised at the site. After a break over the summer, construction kicked into gear again in October and continued throughout this past field season. By March, the finishing touches were coming into place and crews took their first steps across Alaqua Creek on the completed decking.

First Demon Bridge

Long before bridge construction began, the FTA began working with our partners on addressing numerous complicated permitting and access concerns. In the end, generous support from neighboring landowners to the north was the key to moving forward with the project. On the western end of the project site, property manager Jimmy Gainey granted permission for the crews to improve an access road that would allow concrete trucks to reach the creek and pour foundations for the bridge anchors. To the east, Chet Winegarner provided long-term foot access to the site once construction began, as well as providing a place for FOC and FTA crew members to camp as construction progressed. Jackson Guard also granted permission to improve several range roads, and worked closely with us to ensure we could reliably pursue construction without impacting Eglin’s military mission.

Once negotiations for access were completed in late 2017, work began on clearing and improving a makeshift route for concrete trucks to access the site. This alone was a major project, as our crews had to widen and reinforce several miles of roads within both Eglin and the
As the construction wrapped up, FOC and the FTA also performed site restoration work to mitigate the construction impacts on the surrounding creek-side landscape.

Successfully completing an infrastructure project of this magnitude provides an excellent example of how the FTA works with our partners to improve conditions along the Florida Trail. As many of our members are aware, management of this trail system is accomplished via a multi-layered partnership model that draws on the experience and capabilities of various stakeholders. Since 1983, the US Forest Service has served as the federally designated administrator of the Florida National Scenic Trail. The USFS works to complete the trail and ensure it is open, safe, and accessible to the public. This mission is accomplished by engaging with various partners including the FTA and various land managers, as well as providing funding for trail improvements and ongoing maintenance. In the case of Alaqua, the USFS supervised and funded the project, shepherded the permitting process, and secured the experienced bridge builders at Framing Our Community to direct construction.

The second major group of stakeholders in the FT partnership model are the land managers of the properties where the FT is routed. This is a diverse group, including State Parks, federal agencies such as the US Fish & Wildlife Service and the National Parks Service, Water Management Districts, and even individual private property owners. As with any landowner, these partners have the final say on use and access to their properties. In the case of Alaqua, Jackson Guard serves as the manager of Eglin Air Force Base Reservation. Their strong support for the Florida Trail was essential to both securing permissions and permits to build the bridge and granting access for construction on an active military base.

Next, we have the Florida Trail Association. Here at the FTA, we mobilize and support an incredible pool of passionate and skilled volunteers to do the hard work of actually building and maintaining the Florida Trail. Our folks wear the boots on the ground—monitoring trail conditions, performing thousands of hours of trail work, and maintaining local relationships with our land managers and neighbors. Working alongside Framing Our Community, the volunteers of the Choctawhatchee Chapter have done a truly tremendous job on the Alaqua project. They encountered no shortage of difficulties and setbacks, yet overcame them all to see the project
The multi-partner management system for the Florida Trail is given structure in the form of the FNST Coalition. Formed in 2010, the Coalition brings together our diverse group of partners to work collaboratively on making the Florida Trail an optimum recreation experience. Coalition meetings are held twice a year, and members put their heads together to plan for the completion, protection, management, and promotion of the Florida Trail. With the Alaqua Bridge now complete, the USFS took the opportunity to showcase our successful collaboration by hosting the 2019 Summer FNST Coalition Meeting at Eglin Air Force Base. In addition to the usual round-table discussions, this summer’s meeting featured an official ribbon-cutting ceremony for the Alaqua Bridge. This was a wonderful occasion to celebrate the incredible work done by the Chocotawhatchee Chapter and FOC, as well as to highlight the extremely productive relationship we’ve developed with Jackson Guard. Building this bridge was a challenge, and we set a great precedent for even bigger projects to come. As we’ve covered in previous issues of this magazine, our eyes are now turning towards the Yellow River, where another major suspension bridge is necessary to close a 20-mile gap and link together Eglin with Northwest Florida Water Management District properties to the west. With Alaqua as a model, we’ll continue to work within our partnerships to build and improve the Florida Trail for generations to come.

*Temporary bridge*

*Keith LeFevre and Ian Barlow*
Some of the incredible FTA volunteers who were involved in this project

Keith LeFevre (FTA Volunteer), Ian Barlow (FOC Lead) & David Waldrop (FTA President) cutting the Alaqua Bridge ribbon at the bridge opening
Have you read John Muir’s writing recently? Here is a passage from “Among the Animals of the Yosemite”:

The Sierra bear, brown or gray, the sequoia of the animals, tramps over all the park, though few travelers have the pleasure of seeing him. On he fares through the majestic forests and canyons, facing all sorts of weather, rejoicing in his strength, everywhere at home, harmonizing with the trees and rocks and shaggy chaparral. Happy fellow! His lines have fallen in pleasant places,—lily gardens in silver-fir forests, miles of bushes in endless variety and exuberance of bloom over hill-waves and valleys and along the banks of streams, canyons full of music and waterfalls, parks fair as Eden,—places in which one might expect to meet angels rather than bears.

Just reading that one paragraph urges me to immediately start planning a trip to Yosemite. I think it’s because Muir is able to capture a feeling that I want to experience. Similarly, I see a Clyde Butcher photograph and I want to hike the Florida Trail in Big Cypress. It’s fascinating how writing, paintings, photos and other artwork that were inspired by nature have the unique ability to inspire the reader or viewer to head outdoors to enjoy nature.

Inspiring people to use the trail is part of our mission, so we recently asked our members to submit their own artistic expressions so that we could share them here with you. What follows are just a few of the many fantastic art contributions that were inspired by wild Florida. We hope you enjoy them and then hit the trail!
Natalia Morris
I have lived in Florida most of my life, and while I love traveling all over and capturing beauty, there is no place quite like home. For as long as I can remember, I have been drawn to the power and magic of nature. I dream in the sky, heal in the woods, and find my peace by the ocean. A lot of these pieces were created during a time when I was grieving the loss of my Mother. Being alone in nature with my camera has been a big part of my healing process. Nature is artistic, therapeutic, dynamic, and moody. It can teach us so much about ourselves and our lives if we simply tune in and stay connected. I am blessed to be surrounded by Florida’s beauty daily and hope I can continue sharing it.

Natalia Morris
A Poet’s Lens Photography
Instagram: @a_poets_lens
Facebook: A Poet’s Lens Photography
Where Black People & Nature Meet

Healing, Lakeland

Grief, Orlando Wetlands
Leslie Peebles
My Family moved to Suwannee County, Florida from New Jersey in 1971. I had just turned 12. My dad gave up Wall Street and international business to become a chicken farmer for Goldkist. The 80 acre farm had mature longleaf pines, oaks, wild persimmon and hickory; gopher tortoise, foxes, cotton rats, loggerhead shrike, kestrals... so many species! I felt like I had died and gone to heaven. The river was only a mile away. It fostered a lifelong love for Florida’s wildlife. I find nature serves as a living metaphor for the connectedness of all things; internal, external and universal. We are all everything.

My degree is in drawing and painting. I am a self-taught printmaker. I joined Sweetwater Print Co-op in Gainesville in 1998 and began doing relief prints. It is a very slow and meditative process. Pieces evolve over dozens, or hundreds of hours of work. Drawing is a big part of the printmaking process, but I am also a painter. Painting is immediate, sensuous and direct, and provides a strong connection to my subject.

Leslie Peebles
www.lesliepeebles.com
SAVE THE DATE

2019 PANHANDLE GATHERING

NOVEMBER 8-11, 2019

Hosted at Compass Lake in the Hills

DETAILS COMING SOON • VISIT MEETUP.COM/HIKING-CENTRAL-PANHANDLE
Inspiration
by Kelly Wiener, Central & South Florida Trail Program Manager

Artistic-in-Residence Program

Every two years, the Partnership for the National Trails System hosts a conference for the National Trails community. Hundreds of participants, including non-profit organization staffers, volunteers, federal employees, and private sector professionals bring their experiences, stories and knowledge to share. The conference provides the space for networking as well as training in skills useful on the trail and in the office.

I felt very fortunate to be able to join the FTA staff in attending the 2018 Partnership for the National Trails System conference in Vancouver, Washington. As a regional trail staff member, I chose to attend workshops that I thought would be most useful to my position including topics such as attracting volunteer leaders, using Land and Water Conservation funding, working with land trusts, and connecting youth with nature.

I also included one “wildcard” workshop on a topic that stood out to me as fun and interesting: Using Art and Technology to Promote the National Trails. The workshop was led by Charles Tracy, superintendent of the New England National Scenic Trail, and the National Park Service lead for advancing art partnerships in national parks across the country.

In the workshop, Charles discussed the Artist-in-Residence Program, one of the founding and longest running programs in the National Park Service. This program provides artists with unique opportunities to create works of art in varied natural and cultural settings while residing at National Parks across the country. Residencies are typically 2 to 4 weeks in length and most include lodging. Experiences in the program vary widely, from staying in a remote wilderness cabin at Denali National Park in Alaska, to working in a contemporary studio overlooking Weir Farm National Historic Site in Connecticut.

“Art connects hikers to the land. The history of the development of national parks and national trails in America demonstrates that the work of artists—from early painters like Thomas Cole, Albert Bierstadt and Frederic Church, and photographers like Carleton Watkins and Ansel Adams—has always been essential to creating a fully human connection to the landscape, and then motivating the need for conservation and stewardship.”

~Charles Tracy

I checked to see if there were any Artist-in-Residence programs along the Florida Trail and was impressed to see that Big Cypress National Preserve, at the trail’s southern terminus, has hosted 14 Artists-in-Residence since their program began in 2013. These artists’ projects have included paintings, etchings, ceramics, drawings, photography, choreography, videography and poetry.

When I got in touch with the preserve staff to learn more about the program, I was introduced to Madeleine Pinaire. Madeleine is the preserve’s most recent Artist-in Residence to complete the program, and also happens to be a

Madeleine on the Florida Trail

Painting of Big Cypress National Preserve by Madeleine Pinaire
longtime member of the FTA and an avid hiker of the Florida Trail.

After graduating from Flagler College with her degree in Art Education, Madeleine moved to Lake City to teach at a local elementary school. She was suffering from injuries after a decade of long-distance trail running, and saw hiking as more low-impact way to enjoy the outdoors while she recovered. Madeleine was lucky to have moved to a town situated between two of the most scenic sections of the Florida Trail—the Suwannee River and the Osceola National Forest.

“Up to that point, I had never hiked. I had never camped. I wasn’t raised in a particularly outdoorsy family. I just knew that being outside on the trails made me happy and that’s what I was going to do, even if I was going to do it a lot slower.”

She started with short hikes, ten or fifteen minutes out and back, to prevent worsening her injuries. Being used to long-distance runs, she found short hikes to be a test of patience. To prevent further frustration, she decided to turn her excursions into art-making sessions to help her feel more fulfilled after the hike. She crafted a lightweight drawing board and packed it in an old drawstring backpack along with her other sketching supplies. She took great pleasure in stopping along the way to sketch her surroundings and developed a newfound appreciation for her slower-paced treks. Eventually, she was able to hike for hours and took the sketchbook out less and less. Now, she spends her time hiking big miles and taking her experiences back into her home studio.

In the fall of 2018, Madeleine felt that life as a new teacher was getting in the way of her art making. She decided to apply to the Big Cypress Artist-in-Residence program as an opportunity to spend time in a place she loved, and to get back in touch with herself through her art. She was accepted into the program and spent ten days on the preserve during her spring break.

“It was a dream to live practically on the Florida Trail. I was able to see the trail from the kitchen window every day. I walked out to the trail from my little home there and was able to enjoy that little stretch of trail multiple times during that week and a half.”

While in the program, Madeleine developed a routine of hiking in the morning, then spending 5-8 hours in the studio. Sometimes she would even add another hike in during her lunch break.

“Even if it was hot, I just had to get out and see more. Each day, the trails were different and I wanted to see it all: the colors, the water levels, the wildlife.”

During her time in the studio, Madeleine created accordion-style sketchbooks inspired by the colors and vastness...
of the preserve’s prairies. She would spend as much time as possible out on the trails and in the landscapes -- absorbing all of the color, the lines, and the light -- then go back to the studio armed with her memories and a few photos to recreate the landscapes.

“In the studio at Big Cypress, there were no distractions. No internet, no television, no other people. My biggest distraction was the hawk that would hunt outside my studio each afternoon, and that’s a good kind of distraction. I could give all of my attention to my art and the hours flew by. I think it’s important to get away from all of the distractions we have in day-to-day life. I think hiking is a lot like that, too. It’s a means for us to get away.”

“The studio was a big empty classroom space with a desk, so I laid out canvas drop cloths and spread out all over the floor with the intention to fill up the room by the end of my ten-day stay. I loved having the space to spread out, work on multiple pieces, and see everything at once.”

At the completion of the program, artists are required to participate in some form of public outreach. As a school teacher, it was a no-brainer for Madeleine that she would do what she does best: work with children. She held a children’s sketchbook program at the Kirby Storter boardwalk where she taught the basics of landscape drawing and worked with students on drawing plants and wildlife.

For those of us that work to protect and maintain trails, it’s important to pick our heads up every now and then and consider our “why.” Learning about the Artist-in-Residence program has served as an important reminder to me of what a trail is at its core: a means for all of us to feel more connected to our environment. A perfectly maintained and connected trail is of little value if no one is using it. Encouraging artists to engage with the outdoors and share their work is a means of empowering us all to find new inspiration and appreciation for our country’s most cherished public lands.
Gateway Community Spotlight
by Halle Goldstein, Gateway Communities Coordinator

Okeechobee

ACCOMMODATING HIKERS
The city of Okeechobee sits just north of Lake Okeechobee, Florida’s largest body of fresh water. The city is bustling with great local restaurants, cafes, shops, and places to stay that are centrally located or within only a few miles of the Florida Trail. This makes it a wonderful place for hikers to stop by and explore. Some of the businesses in Okeechobee will be offering Florida Trail hikers accommodations and discounts. These can be found on the Gateway Communities page on the Florida Trail website. Whether you would like to just stop for lunch or stay a few days, the many local business owners welcome all types of visitors with open arms.

Okeechobee had no hesitation in partnering with the FTA to become an established Gateway Community. Executive Director, Paulette Wise provided an opportunity for FTA staff to speak about the Gateway Community Program at the Okeechobee Chamber Luncheon, which included business owners, local government representatives, public land managers, religious leaders and even the city mayor. This allowed staff to educate locals on the Florida Trail and the potential benefits that hikers and the city could experience through the Gateway Community Program.

** For more information on recommended businesses and special offers, please visit: floridatrail.org/okeechobee

THE PASSPORT PROGRAM
The city of Okeechobee currently houses 4 stamps that are a part of the Florida Trail Passport Program. The town stamp can be found at the City’s Chamber of Commerce, where visitors will also have access to maps, brochures, and a logbook presenting Florida Trail hikers with accommodations and exclusive offers from local business owners. Nutmeg’s Café, where visitors can grab a delicious sandwich or a made-from-scratch treat, also has a passport stamp. If you’re looking to have dinner or a couple of drinks on a breezy front porch, Parrot Island Grill is the spot. Get your passport stamped with their island-themed imprint. The last stamp can be found at Okeechobee’s KOA resort. KOA provides an exclusive 15% discount on tent sites and cabin camping for Florida Trail hikers. Visitors can enjoy a hot shower, a soak in the pool, and restock on supplies during their stay.

SECTION OF TRAIL
The City of Okeechobee is located 3 miles north of the Lake Okeechobee Park trailhead. The Okeechobee section of the Florida Trail statistically receives the most foot-traffic. Other popular areas of the Florida Trail that reside just outside of Okeechobee city limits include Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park and a newly rerouted section that passes through Micco Bluff. Micco Bluff showcases the natural beauty of Central Florida with a diverse landscape of oak hammocks, cow pasture, prairie and marsh. The notorious Cracker Trail Country Store can also be found just North of Okeechobee. For years, this store has been a well-known landmark for Florida Trail hikers.

OTHER RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES & ANNUAL EVENTS
Incoming visitors can enjoy a variety of recreational opportunities and special events in the city of Okeechobee. Okeechobee is most famously known for fishing due to its proximity to the lake. Here, visitors can catch an abundance of fish including large-mouth bass and speckled perch. Other fun things to experience include airboat tours, biking, equestrian trails, stargazing, and bird-watching.
The city of Okeechobee sits just north of Lake Okeechobee, currently making it Florida Trail’s southern-most Gateway Community.

An aerial view of Lake Okeechobee: Florida’s largest freshwater lake, just south of the city of Okeechobee.

Okeechobee features a variety of wildlife—perfect for bird watchers and wildlife photographers.

Okeechobee also puts on several community events which fall during the Florida Trail hiking season, including:

- **Top of the Lake Christmas Festival** (1st weekend of December): featuring food, performances, a movie, and a parade in Downtown Okeechobee.
- **Top of the Lake Art Festival** (2nd weekend in February): Okeechobee’s biggest celebration, dedicated to showcasing diverse culture and art.
- **Speckled Perch Festival** (2nd weekend of March): Okeechobee’s oldest event, dating back to its first celebration in 1965. The event honors the fishing industry with a fish fry, local art, and food, as well as a parade to kick it all off.
- **Okeechobee County Fair** (3rd weekend of March): rides, raffles, a demolition derby and other fun activities for families.

**Information courtesy of Okeechobee-mainstreet.org. For more information on special events and festivals in Okeechobee, please visit their website.**
Our Florida Trail Association volunteers all hold different stories as to how they first discovered the Florida Trail and started becoming involved with the FTA. For many of them, they began volunteering with us after retirement or towards the close of their careers. We often hear from these volunteers that being outside in nature and maintaining the trail has served as a vital respite from the office settings and hectic schedules of their previous jobs. As we continue to build a volunteer force of younger trail stewards to ensure the sustained care, protection and development of the Florida Trail, we’re starting to see events unfold in which volunteering on the FT has been instrumental in establishing new career paths for some of our stewards. Ralph Duharte is a testament to this.

Ralph was born and raised in Miami. He wasn’t “a nature kid” growing up. The extent to which his family would enjoy the outdoors was going to the beach or having a picnic at the park. Camping, paddling and venturing into the woods was not a part of his day-to-day until recent years. In 2015, a friend of Ralph’s took him to Everglades National Park. He hadn’t been there since a field trip he had went on in the fourth grade. That trip to the Everglades was a turning point for him.

“I was blown away by how many people were visiting the park from out of the country as well as how many out-of-state tags there were in the parking lot. The Everglades were in my backyard and I had never really explored any of it. So, I got a park map, bought an annual pass, and started going out there every two to three weeks to explore different parts of the national park. That’s how I found out about the Florida Trail. I was running out of trails to hike in the national park and started looking at trails to hike in the area.”

When the FT Thru-Hiker Kickoff rolled around in 2016, Ralph discovered there was a multitude of hikers beginning...
their thru-hike from the Southern Terminus of the trail at Oasis Visitor Center and started following a few of them on social media. Among those thru-hikers was Dan Caballero, a veteran who hiked the FT through the support of Warrior Expeditions, a national program that outfits and supports veterans as they embark on long distance outdoor expeditions as a means of therapy. After Dan finished his hike, he returned to his home in Homestead and continued posting and sharing hikes he took throughout the region. Ralph noticed that Dan was hiking in the same areas he had been exploring in Everglades National Park and reached out to him. They later met up and became hiking buddies.

Towards the end of 2016, Ralph and Dan attended the FTA’s 50th Anniversary Conference where Dan presented about Warrior Expeditions and his experience thru-hiking the FT. There, they met and befriended Jess Karcher, who is also a veteran and FT thru-hiker of Warrior Expeditions. After the conference, Jess invited them to join a day hike and soon after, a volunteer trail work party with the Happy Hoofers Chapter. After that, Ralph was hooked on doing trail maintenance.

“Something I appreciate about the work parties is being able to spend a week in the backcountry with other volunteers far away from everything else. It’s pretty cool to be that isolated and to have everyone working together for a mutual cause – clearing the trail so that hikers can enjoy it.”

Hiking back from clearing the Florida Trail in Big Cypress

Trekking through the swamp with Dan Caballero

Volunteering on the FT with Jess and Dan

Hiking in Juniper Prairie Wilderness with Warrior Expedition hikers, Dan Caballero and Jess Karcher. Image courtesy of Jess Karcher
Clearing the corridor
After his first experience volunteering for the FTA, Ralph became involved with his local FTA chapter, the Big Cypress Chapter. At the time that he joined, there were no active section leaders in the chapter. Ralph readily took on the responsibility of being the chapter’s Section Leader for the first seven miles of the Florida Trail from the Southern Terminus at the Oasis Visitor Center to 7-Mile Camp. Ralph’s leadership roles in the FTA have since evolved to becoming the current Big Cypress Chapter Trail Coordinator. As the chapter’s Trail Coordinator, Ralph goes out on routine day hikes, clearing the FT and blazing the path as he goes along. An important task he also performs is assessing trail conditions and reporting them to the FTA’s Central & South FL Trail Program Manager, Kelly Wiener, National Park Service Rangers at the Oasis Center, and Big Cypress Chapter Chair, David Denham. Ralph’s leadership has been fundamental when planning our annual, week-long backcountry work parties in Big Cypress.

For the last work party in February, Ralph coordinated the generous donation of a swamp buggy for the crew to use from Captain Steve’s Swamp Buggy Adventures. Each year, Big Cypress NPS Rangers shuttle us into our base camp and back out at the end of the week using the Preserve’s swamp buggies. With the donated buggy, Ralph was able to shuttle the crew to further trail sections that needed maintenance, increasing our ability to access the more remote areas of the Preserve. We’ve never before had our own buggy driver for the full week of a Big Cypress work party. Ralph was courageous to give it a shot. As our trusty swamp buggy driver, he transported us around the Preserve with impressive skill, ease and confidence. He even identified plants and animals and pointed out fun facts about the ecology and history of Big Cypress along the way. You’d think that he had been doing this his entire life. But like the shifting ecology in the Preserve -- from flooded cypress domes to dry pine flatwoods -- the landscape of Ralph’s day-to-day life used to be entirely different. Ralph previously worked a 9 to 5 office job that kept him indoors. In his free time, he spent as much time as he could volunteering and doing trail maintenance with the FTA.

“I was working an office job and was unhappy with it. I was always online looking for places in nature to explore. I decided that I was going to quit my job and look for a job that would keep me outdoors.”

In his quest for outdoor resources and job opportunities in the Everglades, Ralph discovered Captain Steve’s Swamp Buggy Adventures through Facebook. He originally reached out to Captain Steve to see if his business would be willing to provide the FTA with swamp buggies for the Big Cypress work parties. About a month later, Steve posted that he needed a tour guide—someone who was knowledgeable in the swamp and experienced with driving buggies. Ralph immediately jumped on this opportunity and contact-
Priming a brushcutter to clear the trail in Big Cypress
ed Steve, listing his knowledge of the Everglades through his hiking experiences, the skills he had developed volunteering for the FTA, as well as the Wilderness First Aid and chainsaw certifications he had received through FTA. Despite the fact that Ralph had no experience with operating swamp buggies, Steve saw him as a qualified candidate and hired Ralph as a tour guide. After moving from Miami to Ochopee and spending a couple of months getting familiar with the buggies, Ralph started leading buggy tours by late January of 2018. He currently works two jobs as a nature guide in the Everglades: one with Captain Steve’s Swamp Buggy Adventures and another with Everglades Adventure Tours, where he leads pull-boat, kayak, canoe and walking tours. As a requirement of leading ecotours in Big Cypress National Preserve, Ralph continues to take ongoing naturalist courses offered by the Park Service. The courses cover the local ecology, the history of the area, laws and regulations of the Preserve, and how to give interpretive presentations and tours. Ralph has always had an interest in Florida's rich ecology. His current career allows him to deepen his firsthand knowledge of Florida nature every day. Through his own instrumentation and dedicated pursuits, Ralph shifted from an office life in urban Miami to a peaceful, bucolic life guiding others through one of the nation's most precious and unique ecosystems.

By virtue of his judicious personality, Ralph was bestowed with the trail name, El Presidente a.k.a. El Prez or Supreme Leader. It was given to him by Jess “Swamp Ape” Karcher and another FT thru-hiker named Michelle, a.k.a. Super Classy. With what I know about Ralph, he certainly has my vote.

“They gave me the trail name, El Presidente, because they said I was so diplomatic in the way that I talked about the Preserve and the trail. I sort of took it personally when people talked poorly about the trail. I would speak up for the FT and try to promote it, especially the Big Cypress section.”

On the last day of our Big Cypress work party in February, we utilized Ralph and the buggy he borrowed from Captain Steve to access the final section of trail we needed to maintain. This section was the furthest stretch away from our base camp. Ralph was able to safely transport our equipment and the entire 9-person crew to the work site and back. With
the limited time we had before riding another three and a half hours back, we worked on the trail as efficiently as we could that day. With a few hours to spare before sunset, we all loaded up on the buggy and headed back to camp. Operating a swamp buggy through Big Cypress is challenging, as drivers have to navigate through narrow clearances between trees and maneuver over multiple solution holes, fallen logs and cypress knees. To top off the challenge, Ralph ended up driving the buggy past dusk that day. With the only source of light coming from the buggy’s headlights and our flashlights, he calmly and steadily drove us through the last dense stretch of swamp back to our camp. When we finally came to a stop outside of our tents, a sigh of relief washed over the group.

Before we all had the chance to praise Ralph for being such an all-star that day, he was the first to break the silence by exclaiming, “Wow, look how many stars are out!” We each expressed our gratitude to him as we unloaded the buggy and I watched as he quietly and graciously received each acknowledgement. As we sat around the campfire that evening and reflected on the amazing week we had shared working hard on the trail and camping in the woods together, I asked the group what their favorite moment of the week was. Ralph shared that for him, it was noticing the stars after he had parked the buggy. Henry David Thoreau once said, “Humility like darkness reveals the heavenly lights.” This encapsulates my memory of Ralph in that moment. He wasn’t attached to anyone affirming the brave and generous deed he had done for us that day. He remained humble and stayed present—looking beyond it all to simply admire the night sky.
The sun sets over Big Cypress as Ralph drives the trail crew back to base camp.
ON MARCH 2, 2019, A BUNCH OF CURIOUSITY SEEKERS FROM SUNCOAST VENTURED UP TO LIVE OAK TO CHECK OUT IDIDAHIKE 2019. WE HAD NEVER BEEN TO ONE AS A CHAPTER.

This event was started by the North Florida Trailblazers chapter of the FTA. The Trailblazers are now passing the baton to the Suncoast chapter after sponsoring the event for 11 years!

There will be a $20.00 fee to participate, one or both days...payable day of event. This is a fundraiser to benefit the Florida Trail Association, and its mission to maintain, and complete the Florida National Scenic Trail.

This event will be modeled after our successful FTA 50th anniversary hiking fest in 2016 where we had around 90 participants. The idea will be to offer a "buffet" of hikes that you can participate in over 2 days. Longest hike will be 8 miles.

All will be a short shuttle, from or originate from Tillis Hill.

Get this - The World Wildlife Fund refers to Citrus Tract of the Withlacoochee State Forest as "One of the 10 Coolest Places You've Never Been in North America."

HERE IS A SAMPLING. THE PLAN IS TO OFFER SAME HIKES BOTH FRIDAY AND SATURDAY.

- **Lizzie Hart Sink and Gorge** - 8 mile - 3.5 hours (carpool 10 minutes)
  Description: Most popular hike at Citrus. Once you know it you will want to share with friends. Enough hills to make it fun. Different habitats. Haven’t been here before? This is the hike to sign up for. Possible 3.5 or 4.0 mile Lizzie Hart Option

- **Dames Cave/Peace Cave** - 7 miles - 3.5 - 4 hours (leave from campground)
  Get your flashlight out and prepare to get your knees dirty. Dames Cave - climb down into it and crawl into a side chamber. Explore the surrounding small adjoining sinks. PEACE CAVE ("IF" FORESTRY HAS IT OPEN.) You have to be agile enough to climb/drop into it. It’s not for everyone. There have been safety issues at Peace Cave in the past. Limited to 5 - 10 minutes.

- **Radar Hill (bushwhacking)** - approx. 6 miles - 3.5 hours (carpool 10 minutes)
  Description: Every day, every week, every month. Same ol’ same ol’. Now, throw convention out the window - this is the ‘Salvador Dali’ hike of the Withlacoochee. No set trail, bushwhacking, knee to chest high grasses, footing can be rough, unseen divots. Hiking along side of hills. Hiking stick highly recommended.

- **Exceptional Taste of Citrus hiking** - 2 miles -1 hour (carpool 15 minutes/hard packed dirt)
  Description: Haven’t hiked in a while? This hike will reawaken that fantastic feeling of being in the forest. You will know you are not in a city park. The route is on the orange blazed Florida National Scenic Trail.
  Camping available Thurs, Fri, and Saturday while it lasts. Something for everyone. An event you will remember. Come Join the Fun. March’s weather in Citrus County is the best - and you’ll be in the forest - YES! The entire campground has been reserved for FTA. There is a 2 night minimum.

- **FOOD..** Meals Friday night, Saturday mid day and Sunday breakfast! Menu TBD
Deborah Lynn Thompson
Keystone Heights Artist

In the 1920s and 1930s, billboards in Florida were painted by hand, with no sign of glues or printed vinyl in sight. Only seriously skilled painters could achieve the eye popping ads that graced the highways and buildings in the state. It was this work as an artist that brought Deborah Lynn Thompson’s grandfather to Jacksonville so many decades ago, and her family has been here ever since. Growing up in the Jacksonville area, she explored the outside world as if it was not separate from her indoor life. As a young Girl Scout, she helped paint blazes on the FT in Gold Head Branch State Park, backpacked in the Ocala National Forest, and was exposed to the Trail in many parts of North Florida.

Being on the trail was a seminal part of her upbringing. Art, music, and nature are what inspired and shaped her life to be a free-spirited adventurer and explorer. As a painter, photographer, writer, and storyteller, Deborah captures the spirit of wild Florida and regularly shows her work at galleries, art shows, and in print.

This is not the first time that Deborah has been in The Footprint. The Fall 2009 issue features an article she wrote about her first IDIDAIKE experience. For many, the FTA fundraiser hike is a challenge, but it is especially so for Deborah because of a disability caused by a major spinal cord injury in 2004. She used Gold Head State Park as her training grounds and built up the strength to tackle the 8-mile hike along the Suwannee River. It was an amazing experience, and as she wrote in The Footprint, she felt, “exhilarated, excited, and elated, achievement tickled my body. Animated high spirits of happiness, joy, and delight aroused my senses…” This first long hike for her was so fantastic that a few years later, she trained and hiked 12 miles in the IDIDAIKE – a truly inspirational feat. Deborah walks ‘at a snail's pace,’ and is the last hiker across the finish line, but as anyone who hikes with patience knows, the natural world becomes more visible and vibrant when we take our time. In fact, as an exercise, we should all slow our pace and see how the experience changes for us and how alive the forest becomes, or at least how much more noticeable it is.

Living in Keystone Heights, one of the FTA’s newest Gateway Communities, Deborah has access to the trail in many places. In addition to hiking in Gold Head, Deborah has regularly used the Palatka-Lake Butler State Trail, a paved rails-to-trail section of the Florida Trail. As stewards of the trail, we should all take pride in knowing that it is accessible to disabled hikers and that sections of paved trail can be beneficial to the communities surrounding it.

Be it in her visual arts or her storytelling, as an artist, Deborah’s work captures unique moments that stand out from excursions around the world and...
‘Living in the Jungle’
from her beloved Florida. For example, at the recent Florida Folk Festival where she is booked annually as a storyteller, Deborah recounted in comic detail her ‘guardian’ black racer snakes that woke her up from an afternoon nap outdoors and continued to visit with her for a good long while, enjoying the shared space. She says they are now the guardians of her property. It might be the southern drawl-- something that she is indeed proud of-- or maybe the deliberate delivery, but she had my five-year-old son on the edge of his seat, listening intently. When I was at her house recently, she had me read aloud a story she had published in a book of short stories. It was about tree frogs living through a period of drought, taking advantage of her outdoor shower. It is written stylistically and dialectically in very Southern language, and I was made to read it with accent and all. Even the frogs had southern accents! Not being a native Floridian

This photograph by Deborah of the rising sun on the Ichetucknee River, titled “Someone Cares,” was featured in a Smithsonian art exhibit.

Deborah tells stories of her life in Florida during the 2019 Florida Folk Festival.
myself, I was definitely being graded on my delivery and when I finished, I had to sign the book, as had every person before me that was asked to read that story aloud back to her.

Every person that meets Deborah is inspired by her strength and determination. She says of her first IDIADAHIKE trip, “I would give it my all, push to my limits and try my very best to make it to the other side, for I know and believe that determination is the key to success.” This is evident in her artwork as well. With limited hand mobility, each piece takes a very long time and requires extreme attention and care. Her little cottage home is basically one giant art studio filled with canvasses and light. It is obvious that creativity is her passion.

I admire Deborah’s perspective on art, hiking, and being a native Floridian. She is open, honest, warm, funny, staunchly Southern, and determined to succeed. Given her serious disability, it is amazing the challenges she faces head on and brushes aside. We should all be so determined.
When you join the state-wide Florida Trail Association you automatically become a member of your local chapter based upon your zip code. However, members may attend the activities of any chapter and may transfer to any chapter they wish simply by informing the FTA Office.

Florida Trail activities are organized by our local chapters and are led by authorized volunteer activity leaders. Many of our activities are open to the general public so you can get to know us before you join. Activities can be found online at www.floridatrail.org. Click on “About Us” then click on the “Upcoming Events” button on the left. Local activities are usually also listed on the chapter websites, Facebook pages and Meetups. Click on “About Us” then “Our Chapters” for links to local chapter sites.

Participants in activities must sign an Assumption of Risk form and agree to accept personal responsibility for their safety and the safety of accompanying minors. Always contact the activity leader in advance for more information, to let them know you are attending, to find out any special requirements or equipment for the activity, and to check for any last minute changes.

For more information about chapters and links to websites/meetups/photos go online to FloridaTrail.org/about-us/chapters/ then select the chapter

SANDHILL CHAPTER
Alachua, Levy, Gilchrist, and Marion
352-378-8823

SUWANNEE CHAPTER
Columbia, Dixie, Hamilton, Lafayette, Madison, Suwannee, and Taylor
Norm McDonald 386-776-1920

TROPICAL TREKKERS CHAPTER
Martin, Okeechobee, and St. Lucie
Jim Couillard 772-485-8367

WESTERN GATE CHAPTER
Escambia and Santa Rosa
Helen Wigersma 850-484-0528
**MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION AND GIFT FORM**

ORDER BY PHONE 877-HIKE-FLA OR ONLINE AT WWW.FLORIDATRAIL.ORG

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Daytime Phone Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Address</th>
<th>Email</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Zip</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**MEMBERSHIP CATEGORIES**

Please mark one of the boxes below if you are joining or renewing your membership in the Florida Trail Association.

- [ ] Trail Steward ($35)
- [ ] Trail Builder ($50)*
- [ ] Trail Advocate ($100)*
- [ ] Trail Protector ($500)*
- [ ] Trail Champion ($1000)*

*Includes spouse and children under 18.

☐ I do not want my address shared with FTA-affiliated organizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employer/Occupation</th>
<th>Daytime Phone Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spouse Name</th>
<th>Email</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spouse Occupation</th>
<th>Ship membership package to</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[ ] Me [ ] New Member</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of children</th>
<th>[ ] The Footprint magazine? [ ] Digital [ ] Printed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I learned about the Florida Trail from

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>[ ] Trail Steward ($35)</th>
<th>[ ] Trail Builder ($50)*</th>
<th>[ ] Trail Advocate ($100)*</th>
<th>[ ] Trail Protector ($500)*</th>
<th>[ ] Trail Champion ($1000)*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**MEMBERSHIP CATEGORIES**

I am making a gift to the Florida Trail Association and want my gift designated to:

- [ ] Annual Fund
- [ ] Endowment Fund
- [ ] Trail Protection Fund
- [ ] Map Fund

My gift is In Memory of [ ] In Honor of [ ]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FUND</th>
<th>AMOUNT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SEND FORM AND PAYMENT TO:**

FLORIDA TRAIL ASSOCIATION
1050 NW 2nd Street, Suite A, Gainesville, FL 32601.

**PAYMENT OPTIONS:**

CHECK: Make checks payable to “Florida Trail Association”.

CREDIT CARD: [ ] Visa [ ] Mastercard [ ] American Express [ ] Discover

Credit Card Number: ____________________________ Exp. Date: _____________

Signature: ____________________________________________________________________ Security Code (3 or 4 digits): ____________

To order merchandise from the Florida Trail Store, visit www.FloridaTrail.org

or call the Florida Trail office at 1-877-HIKE-FLA.
Eglin AFB Commander, Brig. Gen. Evan Dertien, stands with Shawn Thomas, USFS FST Administrator, and FTA volunteers on the new Demon Bridge over Alaqua Creek.