



BECKY KIRKLAND

JESSICA PHILLIPS: **AN INTREPID VETERAN** AND NC STATE ALUM FINDS A HAT THAT FITS



Jessica Phillips

BY NATALIE HAMPTON

As a ranger at William B. Umstead State Park near Raleigh, Jessica Phillips asks visiting school children for a show of hands: “who has NEVER been to a state park before?” Sometimes, she is discouraged to see quite a few hands shoot up.

It is both good news and bad news for Phillips: Good news that kids are getting a chance to visit the park, even if it is their first. But Phillips would like to see all kids—and adults—experience the outdoors through North Carolina’s state parks. And it has inspired her to look for ways to spread the word about the state parks and all they have to offer.

“I didn’t want us to be a society where we don’t go outside,” said Phillips, who earned a master’s degree at NC State in parks, recreation, sport and tourism management. “I thought that by bringing the parks to (the people), we might then bring them to the parks.”

Phillips has used her role as park ranger—first at Kerr Lake State Recreation Area and now at William B. Umstead State Park—to spread the word and teach the public about the parks through “Ask a Ranger” columns and podcasts and a museum exhibit of park staff’s nature photos. In the spring, she shared some of her life story at a Story Collider event in Durham.

Phillips’ journey to becoming a park ranger took time, though she always knew that was where she wanted to be. She learned to love the outdoors taking long car trips with her mother from their home in Chicago to national parks in the western United States. She earned an undergraduate degree in biology from Indiana University, and then spent five years in the Marines, including two deployments in Iraq.

While deployed overseas, Phillips was an ejection seat and cooling system mechanic for the AV8B Harrier II jets. Being in the Marines gave her the opportunity to work on different things and move around between different tasks, which Phillips enjoyed.

Before she became a ranger, Phillips worked a desk job briefly for her mother and discovered that office work wasn't for her.

"In the Marine Corps, I was out on a flight deck and an open squadron, and I learned that I was somebody who didn't want to work in an office," she said. "I would have slowly died."

She believed that being a park ranger was a good fit for her skills and her need to move around between many different tasks. And she felt that her military experience had taught her how to learn on the job.

"I applied for every ranger job, and Kerr Lake let me in," Phillips said, adding, "It's the best job!"

Kerr Lake is a state recreation area north of Raleigh, near the Virginia line. It was there that Phillips first reached out to local media to share information about the parks. She developed a regular column for the local newspaper, *The Henderson Dispatch*, and participated in regular programs for the local radio station.

Her columns and radio interviews focused on flora and fauna of the parks, as well as park history. Each year, the parks system adopts a theme—this year, it is spiders—and Phillips would often incorporate a column about that subject as well.

When she moved to Umstead State Park in December 2014, Phillips discovered that the larger newspapers in the area weren't as receptive to her column. So she decided to think bigger, and the state parks division created a page for the "Ask a Ranger" columns. She invited other colleagues to share their parks wisdom as well.

Phillips also decided to try her hand at creating podcasts—recorded interviews with other park employees about the role of park rangers and park management issues, like controlling invasive species. She's still working on the idea and has found that some of the older park visitor centers create a hollow sound on the recordings. Phillips is seeking a way to improve the quality of her recordings.

Last year, when the state parks celebrated their centennial, Phillips created photo exhibits that appeared at two of the state's museums in Raleigh. While uploading her own photos to a parks' gallery, Phillips came across amazing images from other staff and used them in the exhibit "I Spy with My Park Ranger Eye" at the N.C. Museum of Natural Sciences.

An exhibit of historic and modern photos of the state parks—"See the Parks from Our Eyes"—appeared at the N.C. Museum of History to honor the parks centennial.

Last spring, Phillips saw a call from Story Collider for unique

stories to be performed live on stage. Phillips decided to accept the challenge to share her story about transitioning from being a Marine to becoming a park ranger because she felt it was a story that other veterans could relate to. She was selected to share her story in Durham and Kinston in front of live audiences.

One of Phillips favorite places at Umstead is the changing terrain under the power transmission lines that run through the park. Occasionally, the power company will kill off vegetation under the lines, but then the life cycle starts again.

"I love wandering around power lines, especially when the vegetation starts coming back. That's always fun in the spring through fall. Go and look at the life that you find along the power lines," she said.

She also enjoys the history and the natural oasis that Umstead provides in the middle of the city. Before it became a park, the land was mostly used for farming. Within the park's almost 6,000 acres, there are cemeteries, as well as the remains of homes and other structures—including the Company Mill—that were once part of a thriving Wake County community.

Recently, a 90+-year-old man took rangers through the park to visit the site of his childhood home, now on the park's Company Mill Trail. "We were standing right among the bricks, and he's telling us about how he got a tricycle and remembering sitting on the porch," she said.

Phillips is grateful to her supervisors at the N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation for supporting her ideas for bringing the parks to the people. And she attributes many of her ideas to the faculty and fellow students she encountered while working on her online degree program in parks, recreation, tourism, and sport management (PRTSM).

Having served in the Marines, Phillips was eligible for the G.I. Bill to pay for higher education. But her eligibility was running out during the time she worked at Kerr Lake, and she was at least an hour's drive from the state's major universities.

Phillips discovered the online master's degree and was thrilled to be accepted. As a single parent working full time, she felt like the program met her needs. "It couldn't have fit more perfectly into my schedule," she said.

The online program is broken into quarters, and it allowed Phillips to focus on one subject at a time. "I have really used something from every class—it opened my eyes to new ideas," she said.

As impressed as she was with the PRTSM faculty and



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courses, she was equally blown away by the caliber of her classmates—some from across the country—and the ideas they shared. “My cohort was doing amazing things,” Phillips said. “I’ll be forever grateful—they opened my mind to different ideas.” ■

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Ask a Ranger

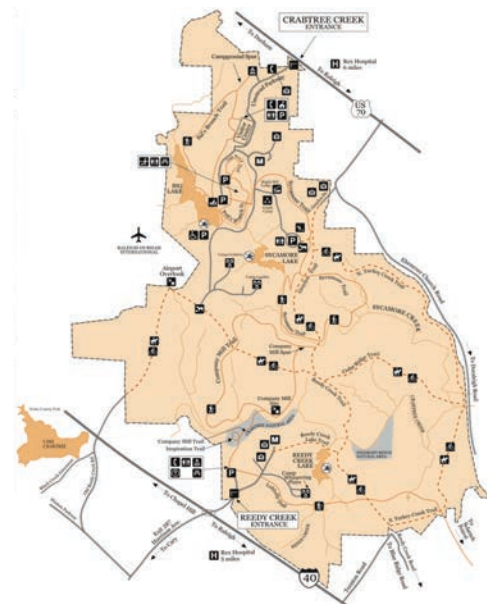
<https://www.ncparks.gov/park-news/ask-ranger>

Story Collider

<https://www.storycollider.org/shows/2017/5/19/raleigh-nc-new-frontiers>

Ask a Ranger podcast

<https://www.buzzsprout.com/115062/545727-what-does-a-park-ranger-do>



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