

Padgett hopeful for tourism boost with upcoming events, plans

By Joel Spears

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NEWPORT—Unexpected circumstances while traveling abroad, along with inconveniences on the road inspired Newport's Bobbie Padgett, a retired U.S. Army weapons artillery specialist, to make a long-term investment for her family; a venture she also plans to use for giving back to the community she calls home, in her words, "on this side of the mountain."

"When my husband and I retired, we decided to start traveling in our RV, then COVID hit, and we were stuck in Nevada," Padgett recalled. "We had to stay put because of all the restrictions, our money was getting thin, our itineraries were nonrefundable, and we ended up parked there for seven months."

During that time off-road Bobbie spoke to a few of her fellow veterans who also enjoyed RV travel, and all agreed that, if they could purchase some of the run-down campgrounds they'd seen and visited along their roadside travels, they could turn a profit improving them.

"Wherever we visited, for every good thing those campgrounds had, they also lacked a lot," Padgett said.

Through brainstorming, they eventually turned their passion for camping into profit by investing in restoration of RV parks and campgrounds through the establishment of Blue Metric Group, a corporation that specializes in refurbishment of strategically located RV parks, with a focus on camping as an affordable vacation and living option. Blue Metric acquires properties near lakes, state parks, and major highways, including the KOA and Tana-See Campgrounds in Cocke County.

"It's just me and a bunch of veterans investing in these campgrounds, getting them to where they need to be," Padgett said. "We currently have 26 throughout the southeast."

In Newport, at KOA and Tana-See, Padgett said improvements have already been made with more to come.

"We have an RV community here at Tana-See; people who choose to live the camping lifestyle," she said. "Most of them don't own land where they can get out and do their own things, for example, like planting a garden. So, we've plotted a community garden for them to grow some vegetables, maybe some flowers, and work the soil—things they could enjoy doing in their own back yard."

Padgett said construction of a fire pit area is planned next at Tana-See, followed by a new playground, which she said was in previously irreparable condition.

The Tana-See Pavilion, a favorite on-property entertainment site for campers and locals Padgett said, will also make a comeback this fall.

“A lot of people loved the pavilion, but it also needed work. Now, we’re ready to bring it back by partnering next month with Empower of Cocke County,” Padgett added. “We’re going to have three bands at the pavilion during the ‘Tana-See Campground Jam Fundraiser,’ September 14, 21 and 28.”

Entertainment for the Jam will include Newport’s own ‘Long Shot’ with Jamie Gann on Sept. 14, featuring Southern rock and contemporary music; the ‘Musical Stylings of Yvette’ on Sept. 21, featuring music from the 60s, 70s and 80s; and Nashville-based ‘Black Collar Outlaw,’ a cousin of Hank Williams, Jr., on Sept. 28 with country and blues. All shows will be held at the pavilion, 7-9 p.m., 112 Carson Springs Road, Newport.

Advance tickets are \$10 per person, or \$60 per table of six. A meal voucher is also available for an additional \$20 per person, or \$120 per table, and includes a hamburger or hot dog with chips, drink, and dessert. The Prime Ate Food Truck will also be at the Jam on September 28. Tickets purchased at the door, if available, will be \$20 per person, or \$80 per table of six, and meal vouchers for \$30 each or \$140 per table. Campers who would like to attend all three September shows, including dinner and a campsite at Tana-See for the entire month may do so for a fee of \$410 and \$120 per table. Only 200 tickets are available for the fundraiser, and 75 percent of proceeds benefit Empower which builds housing, aids education, and provides a means of counseling for single mothers and recovering addicts in the Cocke County Area. For more information or to make an advance purchase, call Tana-See Campground at (423) 415-5000.

“I’m trying to get money on this side of the mountain,” Padgett said, directing her thoughts onto the tourism dollars that flow into Sevier County. “People who travel from other places to vacation in Gatlinburg, Pigeon Forge, and Sevierville—that side of the Smoky Mountains—don’t know about the gems we have in places like Cocke County, or Jefferson County. There’s so much potential in this area. It needs to be marketed and shown.”

Padgett’s additional plans at Tana-See include an October fundraiser with variety show entertainment that will include comedians, singers, dancers, and soliloquy actors. In November the Cherokee Nation will also present dancers, a lecture series, and possibly a drum circle, as well as Native American wares and crafts for purchase, with 75 percent of proceeds benefitting the needs of the Cherokee Reservation. Dates and times for both events will be announced later.

Padgett also noted she and KOA plan to have a presence in local Christmas parades this year, and they are currently organizing a toy drive during November and December that will benefit the children of Cocke County.

“We need to focus on doing things here in Cocke County,” she said. “We need to get Cocke County and Jefferson County to collaborate on these things together, too. There are plenty of things that need to be marketed by getting other organizations and businesses involved that will extend those tourism dollars to our end of the Smokies.”

Padgett said she plans for some of that marketing to include a regular social media series called “Tennessee Jamboree” which will feature local talent from the immediate area through videos on TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook.

“We’re looking for actors and singers to perform modern, ‘Hee-Haw’-like skits, with salutes to all the local towns, to let people know about us,” Padgett said. “I want to use this and talk to business owners, and others, on this side of the mountain to get them known.

Dollywood is great. Pigeon Forge is great. Gatlinburg is great. But when you arrive at those places that’s the only places most people visit. There are other things in other places here. Our area is growing by leaps and bounds, from Newport to Jefferson City, and Bybee to Morristown. With what I have planned, and the positive vision I have for it, I believe we’re going to do a lot of great stuff for the area.”

Padgett said in addition to displaying Cocke County and the surrounding area, she and her fellow veterans also want to form a troupe that travels to the RV parks and campgrounds within their investment area, where they can similarly market those locations as well.

For more information, or to participate in these and other upcoming events, visit Tana-See RV Campground on Facebook, contact Padgett at 415-5000, on the Web at www.tana-seecampground.com, or email hello@tana-seecampground.com.

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