Jan Onan, Champion of Children on the Trail
By Danny Bernstein

Jan Onan is best known for her continued passion and work with children on the trail. She, Kay Shurtleff, and other CMC hikers developed the Youth Partnership Challenge to encourage children and their adults to discover the outdoor beauty of Western North Carolina. Now, Jan is also Education Chair for CMC

Jan spent her childhood in Chicago and considers the city her hometown. She went to college at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee and majored in special education with a concentration in sign language and interpreting.

She became a sign language interpreter and taught at the college level. Once she and her husband Kevin moved to Hendersonville, she worked as a sign language interpreter in schools on a one-to-one basis, from elementary school to university. She found the college courses most challenging with its specialized vocabulary. Jan has always been involved in education.

"Way before the internet, there were teletypes and deaf clubs which brought the deaf community together," Jan explains. "To have a language, like sign language, you must have a culture, and deafness is a culture". American Sign Language is considered a foreign language.

When Kevin and Jan moved to Hendersonville with their three children in 1998, Jan already had lots of family in the area. Her aunt had moved to Western North Carolina in 1971, followed by her mother and grandmother and others. Her mother showed her around the area.

Bruce Bente, a cousin by marriage, was already here as well and introduced her to CMC.

Jan's Hiking Start
Jan started hiking with Bruce when he scouted hikes. On scouting hikes, Jan could bring a child or two and her dog. At the time, Les Love was the only other CMC member who might bring his children on a regular CMC hike.

 "Bruce taught me how to be a leader," Jan says. When her children got older, she joined CMC in 2003.

Children Outdoors
Jan's passion is exposing children to the outdoors. "We need to show them that there's another world out there, a natural world. But in our program, they have to bring a responsible adult."

Jan, with two other CMC members, was sent to an Appalachian Trail Conservancy conference "Trails to every Classroom" in 2007, where they built an outdoor curriculum for children. CMC helped to defray some expenses.

CMC got a great return on its investments. Jan, with the help of her committee, created the Youth Partnership Challenge, modelled after the "White Squirrel Patch" of Conserving Carolina. The challenge consists of 11 hikes, carefully chosen from different land management areas. For example, the National Park Service is represented by a hike in Carl Sandburg Home National Historic Site. For the MST, the hike goes to Buck Spring Lodge from the Pisgah Inn and explores the spring house.

Looking at this list, the first reaction would be that newcomers even without children would profit by doing these hikes; they would help them understand their surroundings in WNC. To earn a patch, the child must do all eleven hikes. The accompanying adult gets a patch as well, if he or she does eight hikes.

Beyond Children's Programs
Jan's children are grown and out of the house now. Theresa is a massage therapist in Asheville. Lucas, with a degree in Outdoor Recreational Management, is a seasonal forest ranger out west. Her youngest, Jake, is moving to Montana to climb mountains.

Jan has been retired for several years. She still prefers hiking mostly on CMC scouts and Meetups because she can bring her dog. She and her husband just came back from a trip to Colorado, where their challenge was climbing Mt. Elbert, the highest point in Colorado, at 14,433 ft.

"It was tough to breathe," Jan says.

The last question
If you could take an out-of-town guest, who hikes as well as you do, on one hike to show off the area, where would you go?

"It would have to include water." The hike includes starting on the MST, going up to Black Balsam for the views, back on the MST to Skinny Dip Falls and Second Falls. It's a variation of a Graveyard Fields loop.