

## Let's get to know Les Love

By Bobbi Powers

Les Love is a *lovely* human being. We spent a *lovely* afternoon sitting in the shade at the Folk Art Center drinking root beer and eating cookies while Les told me story after story about himself in that slow southern drawl. He summed up his life by saying, "I like doing things that benefit other people."



The really BIG thing Les has been doing over the past five years that exemplifies his motto is helping get the third edition of Walt Weber's *Trail Profiles and Maps from the Great Smokies to Mount Mitchell and Beyond* from concept to printing. This entailed getting the Cherokee nation's permission to use their tribal road – no small feat – but Les is a persuasive, slow-talkin' man. Also contributing to the bigness of the undertaking was Walt's desire to extend the book to 190 miles from Clingman's Dome to Highway 80, many miles had to be measured with a wheel - much more accurate than any GPS - and just the way Walt measured every mile in the previous two books. Over a 2 1/2-year period, Les and three other CMCers (Rich Evans, Bob Beach, and Stu English) wheeled every mile of those new sections. Now that the book is a reality, it can be purchased on Amazon and soon will be in Parkway and outdoor stores and at a discount from some club members.

This was not Les's first foray into benefitting others. The Spring Social is his "baby." The idea was born at the 50-50 birthday party he and wife Catherine hosted at their house 13 years ago. (Their birthdays are 16 days apart.) Soon after, while hiking on Roan Mountain, several hikers who had attended the party suggested he make it an annual affair. Sherman Stambaugh said, "Les, that's a great idea, but it's too much work. Have it at the Arboretum." And just like that, Les became the face of the annual Spring Social held at the NC Arboretum.

Les's Methodist church in Weaverville is also a beneficiary of his largesse. He picks and chooses projects that interest him and is generous in monetary donations as well as time.

Les says he owes a "big debt of gratitude to CMC" for two reasons. First, in 1996, soon after moving to Weaverville, he found himself divorced and sharing custody of his two children. CMC offered him a hiking group and a new set of friends. CMC also led him to Catherine, his soul mate, and the two have been happily married for 15 years.

Les's preference for being outdoors began in childhood. When his dad told Les and his three brothers to chop tobacco and they whined, "Do we have to?" Dad's reply was, "No, you get to." That philosophy struck a chord in Les; being outdoors doing anything was better than being inside. Les went on to get a forestry degree in college, working summers for the Forest Service while in school and then getting work with a paper

company in the South where he managed logging operations for several years. He spent a year in Australia as a visiting forester and considered it a working vacation.

At age 30, through a set of fortuitous events, Les founded Foliage Concepts and started a career placing tropical plants in high-end office settings. He says he can't see himself ever retiring because "It's like having a hobby that you get paid to do."

I asked Les if he had a preference for hiking or maintaining. Without hesitation, he answered, "Maintaining." As he puts it, "I love doing projects. Fixing stuff is so important to me." He is still that east Tennessee farm boy at heart.

Les's love of being outdoors and preserving the forests and trails led him to serve four years on the NC Trails Committee, and he is currently on the Board of Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail. But again, his preference is for outdoor projects. So, he has taken on the rehabilitation of Snowball Trail near Craggy Gardens where he can get down and dirty and make a difference with no fanfare but with much self-satisfaction. This is the essence of Les Love, a man who benefits others with no need for accolades.

I hope this article gives some much-deserved recognition to a big-hearted man who lives a good life, is generous and kind. I loved interviewing and learning a lot about one of CMC's biggest cheerleaders and one of its hardest workers.