

Meet Stuart English - February 2012

By Bobbi Powers



Stuart English earned one of CMC's major honors in 2011 – the Award of Appreciation – for his years as editor of our newsletter, *Let's Go*. Stu is mild-mannered and rather self-effacing, and he likes to write, so we did most of this interview via email and the rest while trudging up Mt. Pisgah on a spring like day in February. I offered some questions to get him started, and here is the result. It's time to get to know Stuart English – in his own words....

1. You are a native North Carolinian. During your growing up years, did you appreciate all this natural beauty that we transplants were drawn to?

Growing up in the Pisgah National Forest made me appreciate our mountains. I've never taken them for granted and don't understand people who do. My father's last post with the Forest Service was as Superintendent of Grounds at the Southeastern Experimental Forest Service Station at Bent Creek. We were given a nice house to live in. As soon as I was old enough,

I was wandering the nearby area with an old army canteen on a web belt. I remember riding up what would become the Blue Ridge Parkway on my bicycle when it was a gravel road. Sometimes I would have to stop because the road had been closed for the blasting of the tunnels.

2. Tell us a bit about your educational background.

My education began at the old Venable Elementary which was about where Ingles on Brevard Road is now. I will never forget the school bus driver telling me that he would be in front of my house at a certain time, but would not "...come down to the house and wipe the gravy off my face and help me put my coat on." Welcome to the real world, Little Stu! I graduated from East Carolina University with a BA in English. Later, after my factory shut down, I got an associates degree in Social Services at AB Tech. This was very good for me even if I did not get a job in that field.

3. Your family built the English Chapel in Pisgah Forest. Give us a little history.

My great grandfather founded English Chapel in 1860. My grandfather grew up there on what was then private land and became a horse and buggy doctor in Transylvania County until he brought the first gasoline- powered car to the area in 1903.

4. Tell us about how you began hiking with the Carolina Mountain club.

After 29 years of factory work at Ecusta Corporation, I went back to school, looked for a job, and eventually joined CMC. I remember my first all-day hike was a 14-mile nightmare with Linda Beja and Danny Bernstein during which I thought I would die. But I didn't, and I kept hiking. A couple of years after this death march, Danny confided that she never expected to see me again. By the way, Danny helped get me a job with Diamond Brand where I worked 4.5 years. I retired from that job, but I'll never retire from hiking.

5. You have been a member of CMC since 2005, not a long time, yet you have been extremely active in the club – leading hikes, MST trail maintainer, and current editor of Let's Go. Care to comment on any of this?

Hiking with CMC became a transitional part of my life. I had always liked to hike, but only hiked by myself or occasionally with friends. I was overawed by our hike leaders and never thought I would lead a hike. The way I began hike-leading was an accident. Gerry McNabb, the editor of *Let's Go* at the time, was looking for a replacement and had asked my friend Jean Gard. She did not want to do it and recommended me. I started as editor in 2006. It has for the most part been a pleasure. I am finally getting to exercise my writing/English major/would-be-reporter geek. It has been a pleasure, an honor, and a second chance of sorts. Once I started doing it, I saw how hard it was to fill up the hike schedules. This slowed down the publication of the newsletter. So out of duty and self-interest, I led my first hike. It was a Wednesday and it was something I had done many times: Butter Gap from the Fish Hatchery. It was then I found that I like to lead hikes.

6. That last sentence is a nice segue. What are some hikes that stand out either in a positive or negative way?

My favorite hike that I've led is the Rube Rock-Groundhog Creek Loop. It was suggested for me by Bruce Bente and was out of my comfort zone. But it is a beautiful hike that I feel we may never do again because we cannot keep the trails maintained.

My hike-leading nightmare was a hike I led in the Middle Prong Wilderness. I had 10 people signed up. One was a new hiker and I had only talked to him on the phone. After explaining how tough the hike was, he assured me he had done similar hikes and could do it. When the day came, there were 9 veteran hikers at Cold Mountain Overlook and my newcomer wasn't among them. I was secretly relieved. Two miles after we started, one hiker wanted to go back and look for her sun glasses where we had taken a trail break. We waited for her and later she came back followed by someone. She said, "I

didn't find my sunglasses, but I found a man." It was the tenth hiker that I didn't know. By the time we got to the end of the Buckeye Gap Trail and lunch, he was looking very pale. We had only been going down hill. After lunch we had a very tough uphill back to the parkway. It became apparent that he might not make it. Two of our stronger hikers stayed with him while the rest of us continued. When he finally made it up to Haywood Gap, he told me that he was going to the doctor the next week to see if he needed a pacemaker! I never saw him again.

7. Are there any vacations/adventures that you especially cherish?

As far as adventures go, four years in the Navy was an adventure for a 30 year old factory worker who had never left the country and now got to live in San Diego, Seattle, and travel to Hawaii, Philippines, Australia, Honk Kong, Singapore, and the Indian Ocean. My greatest trip was when several club members, a few others, and I hiked the Inca Trail in Peru to Machu Picchu in 2008. This was one of the highlights of my life and The Adventure of a Lifetime.

8. Now that you have the floor, Stu, are there other things you would like to talk about?

Cancer took more than a year out of my life. What I learned was to appreciate every little thing so much more. When I was young, I used to say things like, "I wish I was 16 so I could get my drivers license." My mother would say "Don't wish your life away." I don't do that anymore. I can wait.

(Bobbi's note: Isn't that a great way to end an interview!)