

ANNETTE REYNOLDS

THE LADY BEHIND THE CAVE

Story by Cinthia Rico

Photos by Cinthia Rico & Derek Jackson

Hidden away in DeKalb County Alabama lays the historic Manitou Cave of Alabama and its most recent director and steward, Annette Reynolds. Reynolds, a licensed RN and health care professional for the last fifty years, grew up in Miami, Florida home to the Seminoles.

Reynolds said she traveled internationally as a volunteer service worker providing aid from war, trauma, natural disasters and has lead retreats, workshops, and groups creating sacred circles throughout her life.

"I am a board certified masters level creative arts therapist and a CPE hospital chaplain," Reynolds said.

She became fascinated with the Manitou Cave during a visit in 2014 after the cave, and the surrounding land was put up for sale.

"I went through the cave and couldn't believe it," Reynolds said.

Reynolds said she became captivated with the cave and

that first year she took several hundred people into the cave with the permission of Steve Brewer.

"There were three different retreats, and people came from all around to go inside," she said.

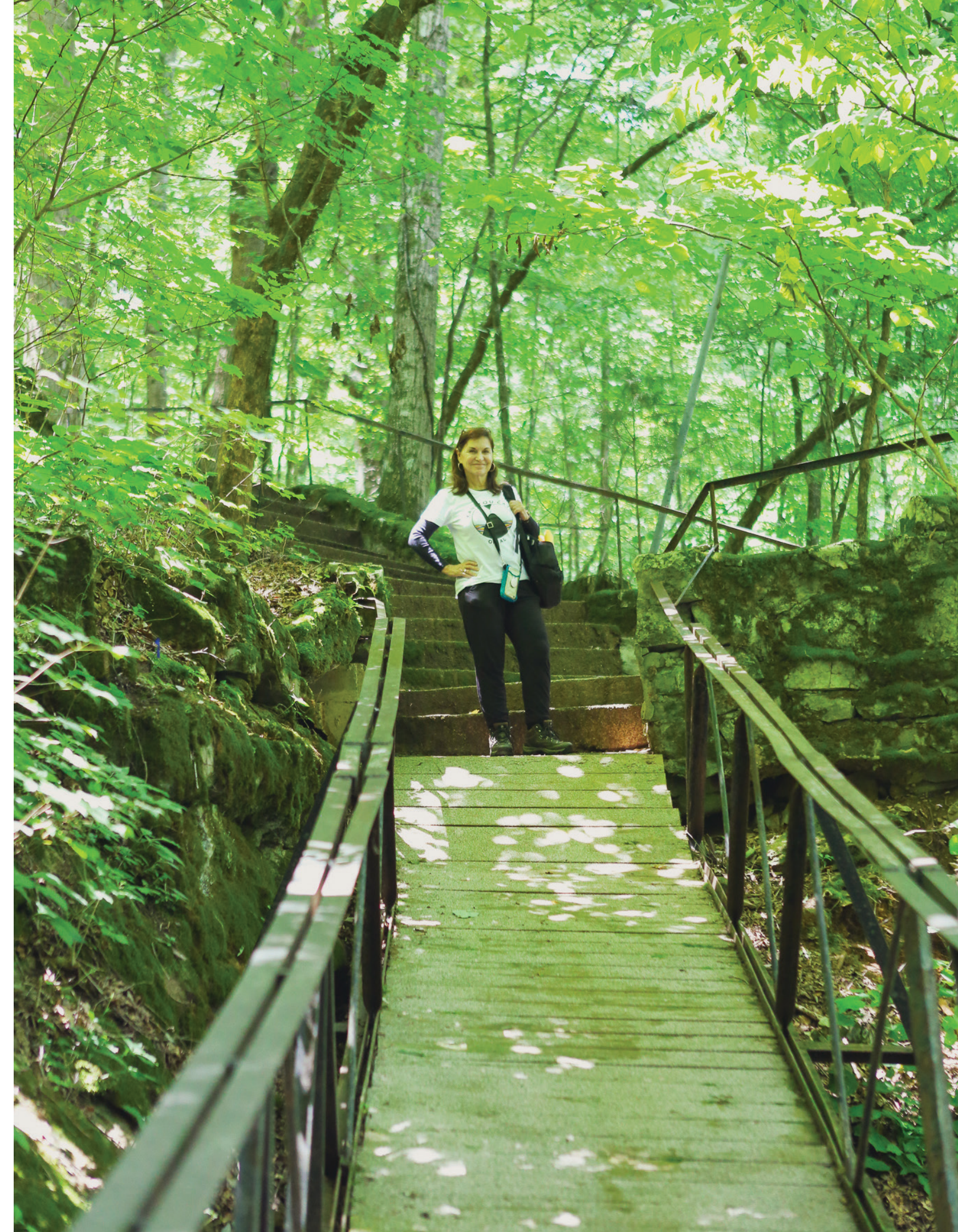
Reynolds said as word of the cave spread as she continued to give tours during the time Steve Brewer was trying to sell it.

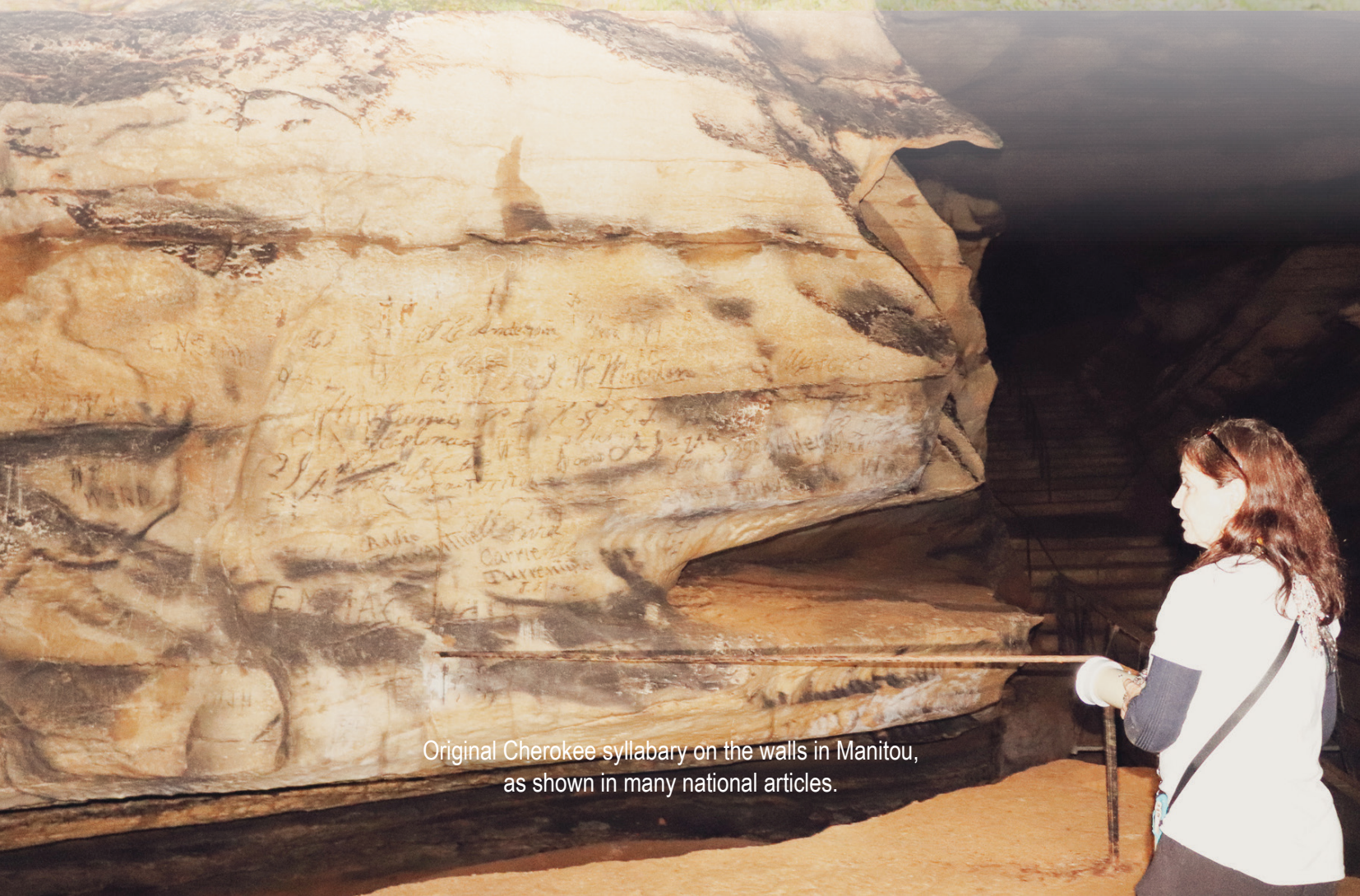
According to Reynolds, she knew nothing about caves in the beginning but wanted to learn, and that triggered a chain of events that guided her towards the protection and conservation of the cave.

"I came across the National Speleological Society that is located in Huntsville, Alabama," she said.

In July of 2015, through constant dedication, Reynolds was able to raise enough funds through generous donors who help her purchase the Manitou Cave along with the 10 acres of land surrounding it.

Reynolds said with the help of countless volunteers from the NSS who devoted 400 hours that summer helping clean





Original Cherokee syllabary on the walls in Manitou,
as shown in many national articles.

the steps and bridges they were able to carve the way for the future cave gate.

“The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, of North Carolina, offered to help fund the cave gate if I got the best cave builder to build it,” she said.

Reynolds said Kristen Bobo and her team along with local volunteers including Jerome Carter, were responsible for the completion of the 3,000-pound steel gate.

“It was really remarkable, and the beautiful thing about this specially designed cave gate is that it’s eco-location friendly, so the bats started returning,” Reynolds said.

Reynolds made it a point to stress that she is not Cherokee; she is not a Fort Payne native, does not have deep pockets but has taken the time to understand and learn the various histories regarding the cave and the bands of Native Americans.

“I am supposed to be retired, and I had no idea that this is what I would be doing,” said she.

She believes in leaving the world a better place by respecting all people and living things.

“Somehow the cave chooses me, and I choose the cave to devote a lot of 24/7 time,” Reynolds said.

Since its purchase, Reynold has devoted numerous hours and funds towards preserving the cave and restoring the existing welcome center by keeping key pieces such as the California redwood lumber brought to honor Sequoia but also adding new features.

In 2016, Reynolds founded the Manitou Cave of AL Inc. 501 c3 non-profit organization. Reynolds said the mission of this non-profit organization is protection, preservation, conservation, and education of the cave.

“The cave has a different appeal now then its showcase years in the 60s



Cedar tree used by the Cherokee for medicinal and spiritual needs



Reynolds with board member
and DeKalb Living Director,
Derek Jackson

because of its historical and cultural value,” Reynolds said.

In July, members of the Cherokee Nation from Tahlequah, Oklahoma visited Manitou for the first time. “We’ve had visitors from 21 states and eight countries, Ireland been the most recent,” Reynolds said.

Contributing to the cave’s uniqueness is the Manitou Cave snail whose existence is unique to the cave and is not found anywhere else in the world.

Reynolds, along with volunteers, continue to care for the maintenance of the cave, land, and surrounding spring-fed pond assuring the preservation of its fragile ecosystem.

“I really have devoted the last couple of years to rehabilitating the Visitor Center, and there’s a lot of work that had to be done to keep it historical but also updated,” she said.

Reynolds said the property is not only a Certified Wildlife Habitat but the

syllabary inscriptions on the walls of the cave have been researched and translated by all three recognized bands of Cherokee.

“I am absolutely thrilled, and my hope is that it continues to be preserved and protected,” she said.

As of late, the research surrounding the Cherokee syllabary in Manitou Cave has been published in *Antiquity Journal*, a journal of archaeology, Volume 93 of April 2019 edition.

“In the future, I hope to create a walking “Trail of Peace” and a “three sister garden,” Reynolds said.

To volunteer or donate or to schedule a group tour contact Annette Reynolds at manitoucaveofal@gmail.com or visit www.manitoucaveofal.org and on Facebook at [manitoucaveofAL](https://www.facebook.com/manitoucaveofAL).





This gate was installed by the Eastern Band of Cherokee Natives.