



Joseph Pate, then director of the Bonner Leaders Program at Young Harris College and Nathan Hughes (holding award)

Nathan Hughes and the Bonner Leaders Program at Young Harris College 2013 recipient of the Holman Award

The river sparkles as it welcomes a new generation of volunteers

By Tom Bennett

As you motor past a small college in a mountainside setting that better-known U.S. centers of higher education would kill for, and you know the fragile Hiwassee River and its impoundment Lake Chatuge run nearby, you wonder, is there an affinity for water quality here at Young Harris College? A second question rattles around and leaves bruises in my head. It is: will my Geritol generation be the last to fight for the Hiwassee in a post-Earth Day American South?

Well, I have both the answers and here they are: Students at Young Harris College are becoming the very core of the championing of lakes, rivers and streams in the upper Hiwassee River basin. And the college's commitment to hands-on service learning to keep high the level of quality of the water, land and air is being spearheaded by the Bonner Leaders Program.

Nathan Hughes was one of the first students to select the Hiwassee River Watershed Coalition as one of his work sites in September 2010 when the Coalition became a host organization for Bonner Leaders. His work, and that of several other students in the three years since, with the Coalition's restoration program has been invaluable and their enthusiasm for the mission is infectious.

On a day last November, Hughes and a half-dozen others arrived by 8:30 a.m. for the Lake Chatuge Rivers Alive cleanup at the Bearmeat Creek site. "They did a tremendous job, even

hauling an old stove out of the lake,” said Scarlett Fuller, Lake Chatuge watershed coordinator for the Hiwassee River Watershed Coalition. “They’re great leaders.”

Then dressed in their t-shirts won for picking up the most lake trash, Hughes and three others drove for an hour to Andrews, N.C., and helped the Coalition plant trees at the Town Branch restoration project.

“Young people aren’t lazy, and they do care about their communities,” Fuller said.

The Bonner Leaders program was created at Berea College in Kentucky by a Princeton, N.J., couple two decades ago and is now on many campuses. At Young Harris, it is led by led by Dr. Joseph Pate and it works on projects at non-profit agencies throughout the community out of the campus’ Center for Appalachian Studies and Community Engagement.

Here is the center’s mission statement, good enough if you ask me to be a daily guide for life here in these mountains: “We value the inter-relationship between place, ethics, citizenship, sustainability and transformative engagement.”

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Past and present Bonner Leaders who have worked for the Hiwassee River Watershed Coalition are: Ethan Burch, Taylor Davis, Nathan Hughes, Alec Housholder, Marcus Nash, Ashley Short, Jordyn Utley, Jordan Wilkes