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## Mark Williams, Trails Forever, and Temporarily Homeless Pets: Joyfully Caring for the Community

Make a list of what you love to do, what really interests you, and then plug in to some facet of an organization devoted to what you love. Board of Directors positions and high-profile fundraising may follow, but first, find the projects that give you joy and balance in your life—the areas for which the time spent does not feel like work—and devote yourself there.

This is the advice of Mark Williams of Young, Williams & Kirk, PC, who counts himself lucky to have come from Graham County, North Carolina on the other side of the Smoky Mountains to land in Knoxville in 1985 with incomparable philanthropic models, Lindsay and Robert Young, as his mentors and eventual partners. In 1994, Lindsay Young founded the Aslan Foundation, which, according to its mission statement, focuses on “preserving and enhancing the natural beauty, assets, and history of Knox County.” Lindsay Young passed away in 2006, but the family legacy continues to grow through the Aslan Foundation, for which Mark is a director and the current Secretary. Among the projects funded by the Foundation are two especially close to Mark’s heart: the Young-Williams Animal Center in Knoxville and the Trails Forever endowment through Friends of the Smokies.



Mark Williams

Mark describes charity as providing for ongoing needs but philanthropy as providing a structure through which to solve problems that create those needs. There is no doubt that Mark is a philanthropist by this definition. He and Lindsay Young co-founded the Young-Williams Animal Center, which opened its doors in 2001, in an effort to help the city and county approach the problem of “temporarily homeless” animals by simultaneously providing humane shelter, invigorated adoption programs, and as a key, a low-cost spay and neuter program. The Center opened a second facility in 2007, which includes an on-site spay-neuter clinic and overflow animal housing. According to Center CEO Jeff Ashin, the spay-neuter program, including on-site and mobile facilities, was responsible for spaying or neutering 30,000 animals from 2007 through 2012. As a poignant note on how closely this solution strikes at the problem’s cause, no healthy animal has been euthanized at the Center since the first of this year.

Ashin, who has been CEO since November 2012 and was formerly CEO of Mercy Health Partners when Mark was Chair of the Mercy Health Foundation Board, is impressed with Mark’s ability to maintain a specific vision for animal welfare while allowing the organization to determine implementation of that vision. Mark is now Chair Emeritus of the Center and the current Chair of the Board of Friends of Young-Williams Animal Center, the organization’s fundraising arm. Mark’s wife, Kristin Williams, who owns a graphic design and advertising studio, serves as the current Chair of the Center’s Board. From CEO Ashin’s office window, he can see happy new owners walking away from the shelter every day with overjoyed animals alongside, but difficult problems of abuse and neglect remain. He notes the work requires a balance of compassion and realism that can be difficult to maintain but that Mark and Kristin exemplify. Mark has also sought long-term solutions for Friends of the Smokies and shown an affinity for what the organization’s president, Jim Hart, calls “possibility thinking.” A prime example is the Trails Forever program, which Mark initiated by taking the model of a temporary program in another national park, enlisting the help of the Aslan Foundation for a \$2 million endowment, and challenging Friends of the

Smokies to match the endowment through fundraising. The result is a \$4 million endowment, which can now permanently fund through interest income the \$200,000 needed each year for a third trail maintenance crew.

To visualize the impact of this solution, imagine hiking the recently reopened Forney Ridge Trail to Andrews Bald at Clingmans Dome. Trails Forever crews worked from 2008 through 2011 to transform an eroding trail, so impassable in sections that hikers were damaging surrounding resources in order to avoid puddles and deep trenches, into a safe trail with natural drainage structures and staircases hand-crafted from native wood and rock (see <http://www.nps.gov/grsm/playourvisit/forney-ridge-project-overview.htm>). As CEO Hart explains, before Trails Forever made a third crew possible, there was one crew based in North Carolina and one in Tennessee, and emergency trail triage was nearly all those crews could handle for over 800 miles of rugged terrain no motorized equipment could enter.

Mark is quick to say that a cadre of volunteers makes Friends of the Smokies

a vibrant organization, with some trail volunteers working over 100 hours each year. He is also quick to applaud the efforts of another well-known Friend of the Smokies, Tennessee Supreme Court Chief Justice Gary R. Wade, who Mark urges new attorneys to emulate in their service to others and who he credits with teaching him that if you “take care of your community, your community will take care of you.” For his part, Chief Justice Wade says that while Mark learned to pick the banjo and guitar and became a champion clogger while a “country boy,” the graduate of “that little law school in Durham—Duke, I think it’s called” is now “an effective, straight-laced attorney at the head of one of Knoxville’s oldest and most distinguished law firms” and “among the most valuable volunteers in our Park.”

The list of nonprofit organizations for which Mark has provided leadership and to which he has devoted countless hours is long, but a common thread among them is that each has held a personal connection and real interest for him. Mark urges young lawyers to realize how valuable the problem-solving skills they have honed can be to nonprofit organizations but also to have fun using those skills. When I asked Jim Hart for one last word about Mark, he remembered turning around at a National Park Commission event and seeing Mark clogging (“he’s a seriously good clogger”) with former United States Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor. Mark was clearly enjoying himself.



(l to r) Jim Hart, President of Friends of the Smokies; Re. Dr. Dan Matthews, Board Chair of Friends of the Smokies; Dale Ditmanson, Great Smoky Mountains National Park Superintendent; Debbie Way; Lindsay McDonough of the Aslan Foundation; Joan Cronan; Mark Williams; and Danny Bernstein