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More than 400 folks come out for activities at Carter Caves event

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OLIVE HILL, Ky. -- Just a week after running 48.6 miles at Walt Disney World, Laura Nelson was due for some "down" time.

And boy did she take that task seriously.

A Florida native and now Columbus, Ohio resident who ran four races (48.6 miles) in the Dopey Challenge at Disney, found herself rappelling off the cliffs at Carter Caves State Resort Park during the fifth annual Winter Adventure Weekend.

"This is my recovery period and I wanted to do something different," said Nelson, after rappelling by Smoky Bridge, Kentucky's biggest natural arch on Saturday. "I feel like you have to experience different things because you don't know what you can do until you get out and try -- and this is way out of my comfort zone."

Nelson was one of the more than 400 people that came from 10 different states to get outside their comfort zones and try out the smorgasbord of activities at WAW. The event featured 148 different trips -- everything from wild caving and ziplining to hiking, rock climbing, winter survival and campfire cooking classes.

Indoors, there were even more wild and woolly challenges such as the infamous Squeezebox, a slackline (tightrope walk) and The Kenny McCoy Corrugated Cave, the world's longest cardboard cave featuring a 40-foot-long, 18-inch-wide industrial pipe to slide down (and to try and crawl up).

Called Crawlathon for 27 years until White Nose Syndrome, a fungus mass killing hibernating bats, canceled the event in 2009, the more diverse event that took its place -- Winter Adventure Weekend -- is now in its fifth year giving the state park a financial boost in the heart of its slowest season.

Speaking to a packed room Saturday night at the Caveland Lodge during the Squeezebox finals, photo slideshow, live auction and music, park naturalist/event organizer Coy Ainsley said it would be impossible without the "Staph," the comically

named volunteer team of more than 100 people whose infectious spirit for helping keeps the event thriving.

"This is an awesome event and I think the premier event in Kentucky State Parks," Ainsley said. "The only way Winter Adventure Weekend happens is because of a lot of dedicated people who love Carter Caves and who love the outdoors and who love to volunteer to teach others what they love to do."

Many of those volunteers are members of the Tri-State caving group, ESSO Grotto, and have been volunteering for more than 30 years.

Ann Honaker, who now lives in western Kentucky, said it is like a family reunion to come back and see so many friends such as Mary Jo Martin, Bruce Bannerman, and Steve and Susie Duncan, who spent their anniversary weekend volunteering at the event.

Saturday night, long-time volunteer, expert backpacker and WAW's volunteer web site coordinator Andy Niekamp was awarded the distinction of Kentucky Colonel.

"Andy you have now joined great people like Elvis, Lyndon Johnson and Dolly Parton as a Kentucky Colonel," said General Manager Chris Perry, getting a roar from the crowd.

All of those volunteers, and Carter Caves staff went into action Saturday when the county received a snowstorm that dropped a pile of fresh snow onto an already snow-covered landscape creating slick conditions on the hilly, curvy roads.

Perry fired up the snow blower, workers stayed in the plow and salt trucks and volunteers scrambled as some off-site caving trips to some of Carter County's most famed caves had to be canceled and folks moved to other trips.

"This is the most snow I can remember since 2001 and this was maybe tougher because we already started with four inches on the ground," Ainsley said. "It was all we could do for four straight hours to keep our two hills clean to get to the Welcome Center. We basically sent all off-site trips, Tar Kiln, Cascade, Sandy, Fern and Flood and turned those into Horn Hollow and Rimstone trips so they still would get the wild caving experience. There was no cancellation of any other trips."

Boy Scout troop leaders from Milan, Ohio, Huntington and other cities, used the winter storm to show scouts how to set up a winter camp utilizing snow as a wind shield and insulation for tents.

Photographers and kids lapped up the winter wonderland, sledding, snapping pics and enjoying the blanket of white that coated the trees and rock-carved hills.

"We had some people having trouble getting here and getting back out on the snowy roads, and you'll always have a few people that aren't happy but 90 percent of people really understood the conditions out there and they really enjoyed being out there in it," Ainsley said. "There's been snow ball fighting and kids rolling down the hills and sledding and making snow angels, and everyone has been taking pictures. It really was

like a winter wonderland. A lot of people enjoyed the hikes to and from the caves as much as the caving itself because it was so pretty."

There were several booths and vendors at WAW. Folks with the Life Adventure Center were busy indoors and out.

Workers from the Versailles, Ky.-based outdoor adventure center had for the second year set up a rock climbing route at Carter Caves, a rare treat since rockclimbing is typically outlawed on state park property. Folks who signed up for the beginning rock climbing class got to hike out and to climb virgin rock at the site in the vicinity of Fern Bridge.

Inside, Cara Varney, the program coordinator for Life Adventure Center, drew a full room to her Backpacking Gourmet cooking class giving folks light-weight but tasty recipes for her Darn Tootin' Black Bean Chili as well as one for brownies.

Varney, who is leaving in the spring to hike the 3,000-mile-long Pacific Crest Trail that runs from Mexico to Canada in the western United States, said WAW is a great excuse to come over, meet fellow adventurers and to let people know what they do at the LAC.

"We often say we are the best kept secret in Woodford County but we don't want that to be the case and events like this really help get out the word," Varney said. "We feel lucky to get to come over and lead some trips and help out. It's a really nice reprieve from winter office work."

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