

*Three nonprofits come together in a remote section of Jefferson County offering guests a place to find peace and tranquility.*



Kevin Hughes, site and sustainability coordinator of the For the Love of Children, stands at one of the campsites on the FLOC Outdoor Educational Center located on the Rolling Ridge Foundation property in Harpers Ferry. FLOC is one of three nonprofits that share 1,400 acres at the rural site. Rolling Ridge Foundation was founded in the 1970s. (Journal photos by Crystal Schelle)

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### **Fact Box**

Rolling Ridge is located off of Mission Road in Harpers Ferry.

To find out more about Rolling Ridge and the Rolling Ridge Study Retreat Community, visit [www.rollingridge.net](http://www.rollingridge.net)

To find out more about For the Love of Children, visit [www.flocoutdoors.org](http://www.flocoutdoors.org)

For more information about Friends Wilderness Center and Niles Cabin Retreat, call Sheila Bach at (304) 728-4820 or visit [www.friendswilderness.org](http://www.friendswilderness.org)

**HARPERS FERRY** — Henry David Thoreau would often escape into the woods to sit beside his beloved pond and find inner peace. It is that simple belief that nature can calm the soul is what the Rolling Ridge Foundation, located off Mission Road, is based on.

With directions that begin “take the left onto the gravel road,” visitors weave their way back into the woods, stopping briefly to let a deer scamper across their path, and leave the modern world behind them on the paved road.

Rolling Ridge can best be accessed by a SUV or a car with a good set of struts, but that’s the price to pay for tranquility. Even as a shower of wintry mix falls from the sky during a March afternoon and the trees are still bare from their leaves, it’s easy to see why Henry and Mary Cushing Niles fell in love with the land when they came in the early 1970s.

According to Tim Siegel, member of the Rolling Ridge Foundation’s board of directors, the Nileses, who were Quakers, dreamt of having a place where people from the Washington Metropolitan area could escape from the city life and heal their spirits.

After securing several tracts of land, the Nileses put together 1,400 acres of land sandwiched between the Blue Ridge mountains and the Shenandoah River. “It’s like an oasis,” Siegel says.

Although it is Rolling Ridge Foundation that owns the lands, there are three nonprofit organizations that share the land: the Rolling Ridge Study Retreat, the Friends Wilderness Center and For the Love of the Children.

It may have been built on Quaker beliefs, but Siegel says the area is open to all faiths. And that was what the Niles wanted — a place welcoming to all.

Tim Siegel, board member of Rolling Ridge Foundation, shows the yurt, which provides complete protection for those who are hiking during cooler times of the year. The floor is carpeted and sleeps about four.



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The organizations at Rolling Ridge offer opportunities for people from the city to spend one or more days to come out into the wilderness and take in the silence. That's how Siegel was introduced to Rolling Ridge. "Many years ago I came for a staff retreat," he says.

An avid outdoorsman, Siegel not only eventually became a member of the board, but also a volunteer with Friends Wilderness Center. He says many people who have stayed on the property and involved with any one of the three nonprofits is the attraction of how remote the area really is. "They like the quietness," Siegel says.

As varied as the backgrounds of the visitors, Siegel says so are the reasons they come. It may be for a retreat, it may be to hike, but it is all for the same purpose — to become one with nature.

And for most of its time, Rolling Ridge has maintained a quiet home in Harpers Ferry. With most locals not knowing about the area, but it is known by those who live in the Washington metropolitan area.

Since its beginning Rolling Ridge hasn't had to change much from its rustic appeal.

Siegel says although except for better signage for trails, it has remained mostly the way it has since the Nileses purchased the area. There is even a limit to the number of buildings to be on the property, helping again to keep the population down from the nine permanent residents who live in the Rolling Ridge Study Retreat Community.

One resident is Sheila Bach who is the general manager at Friends Wilderness Center. "I'm an accountant and I was asked to do an accounting for Rolling Ridge Foundation back in 1998," she says.

A few years later Bach moved to Rolling Ridge's property and spent eight years as a volunteer before she became a staff member. She says she was attracted to the area "just because of the place, it's so beautiful and peaceful." And part of her duties is to keep

guests happy at Niles Cabin Retreat. To get to the bridge, visitors have to forge a brook and climb a small hill to get to the cabin.

And there it sits as if Thoreau had thought of the location, because it sits beside a pond. Bach says there's another nearby pond that is great for swimming in the summer. And those who practice catch-and-release are allowed to fish in the stocked ponds.

The foundation of the Niles Cabin was already on the property when the couple purchased the property. Siegel says the Nileses rebuilt the cabin by hand, staying in it during the reconstruction.

Today, it is a two-room retreat (one room has a double bed, the other has twin beds) with an enclosed porch to look at the pond. For a competitively low price people can stay at the retreat and Bach serves as host and chef cooking up meals.

Bach says visitors range in age and background. "It varies considerably," she says.

She says she's had college students on spring break stay, a single mom and her daughter stayed, another time it was a young couple. "Many people just sit, read and relax or go for hikes," Bach says.

The time spent at the Niles Cabin, Bach says, is to relax. There is no TV, no newspapers, no air conditioning and meals are prepared. Reservations are required. "It's totally up to them for what they want to do," she says.

Friends Wilderness Center maintains more than 28 miles of trails. There are two fun surprises on the center's property. One of which is a roofed tree house in which the sides are open, but overnight guests are protected by a roof. The area sleeps 15 on the floor or seats 25 in chairs. A nearby yurt provides complete protection for those who are hiking during cooler times of the year. The floor is carpeted and sleeps about four. There are also other amenities such as an outhouse, picnic table and fire circles. Hikers can bring their own food or arrange to eat meals at the Niles Cabin Retreat.

Those who want to take advantage of the trails are welcome to even come up for the day, Bach says. However, there is only one rule — check in. She says she had to call the police once when two hikers decided to find the feeder trail from the Ridge to River trail to the Appalachian Trail from the side of the AT. "You can't find it from there," Bach says.

The two didn't check in with her and she just happened to see them walk into the woods. Luckily, they were found as dark fell. She says it's a lesson on checking in before going into the woods.

Those who take the time to hike the trails will discover the beauty of the area, Bach says, including a couple of waterfalls.

Bach says she has fallen in love with her surroundings and finds that it's hard to pick a favorite time of year. She says she loves all the seasons. And don't look for her to make the move back to the metropolitan area anytime soon. "I'm never going back," she says.

Trish Stefanik is a permanent fixture at Rolling Ridge Study Retreat. She's one of nine who live year-round on the residential community.

Stefanik is a contemplative artist and had come to the area by way of Washington to do some sketching. And just like Bach, the wildness captured her heart and soul "I liked it so much, I've stayed," she says.

She says she felt, in part, called to be at Rolling Ridge. "I want to use my gift for others," she says.

As part of the residential community, Stefanik is one of the stewards of the land. "We help care for the place," she says.

They maintain the trails and area, making sure to clear trees that fall because of Mother Nature. They also host several retreats for reflection.



Trish Stefanik of Rolling Ridge Study Retreat stands outside the Meditation Center on the property. The Rolling Ridge Study Retreat offers programs for those who are looking for a spiritual getaway.

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According to literature, themes for retreats include community and family, Bible and spirituality, ecological integrity, peace and justice and meditative arts. There is also A Day Away for pastor and church leaders on a regular basis. Also available are private retreats. Stefanik says she recently hosted a silent retreat.

The Retreat House has a kitchen and sleeps up to 14 comfortably. On the property there are guest facilities and a rustic campsite.

For those whose purpose it is to use their time at Rolling Ridge Study Retreat there is a Meditation Shelter with a labyrinth nearby for guests to walk and think. Those who want to celebrate the arts can use the Art Cottage.

"There is a lot of stimulation in our our lives. There are a lot of busy people. ... but what they want to do is come and be still," Stefanik says.

Being outside with nature, Stefanik says, has a healing quality. She says many come to meditate and pray in the beauty of the area. "The real gift is simplicity," she says.

Adults may need time to unwind, but so do children. For Love Of Children knows that nature can have a healing effect on youngsters as well. That's why the organization brings young children and at-risk youth to the area for educational experience at the Outdoor Educational Center.

Kevin Hughes, site and sustainability coordinator, has been volunteering with the FLOC for years helping at-risk children enjoy the outdoors. Hughes says one reason why he wanted to get involved was simply for the children. "I was an at-risk youth myself," he says.

But it's not always specifically children. Hughes says the Outdoor Education Center hosts people from 8 to 80.

It is to make sure that the next generation is taken care of FLOC offers several programs for at-risk youth based in the Washington, D.C., area. Many of the programs happen in their own backyards, such as the Neighborhood Tutoring Program, but the Challenge and Leadership Program is at the Outdoor Education Center.

The FLOC's portion of the Rolling Ridge's estate is 350 acres. And it is there they bring teens and tweens who need encouragement in a safe environment.

Hughes says FLOC, which has recently become a member of the West Virginia Education Association, has also started to partner with Jefferson County schools. Charles Town Middle School students will be coming to FLOC to start planting a garden. He says the students will stop by over the course of the next couple of months to maintain the plot.

The land contains a campsite, with a fire ring and a outdoor grill and several sleeping quarters. In the summer there are 64 beds and in winter there are 20. Hughes says recently a Girl Scouts troop used the facility.

One of the things Hughes is excited about is that FLOC trains to be self-sufficient as possible. Food is grown on the property at FLOC (as well as the other organizations) that is used to feed guests. "About 85 percent is organic," he says.

Hughes says about 95 percent of the food is unprocessed, which means they even bake their bread. "It's really what it's all about," he says.

He says they try to be sustainable living. Eventually, he says, even all of the water-flush toilets will be replaced with compost toilets.

Hughes says FLOC is "wonderful because it's a safe environment." He says that's important for families today.

He says it's really about the children. "We really want them to leave with self-confidence and the tools to be a member of society," Hughes says.