



## Little Cities of Black Diamonds Prove to be a Gem of a Partner

*The Wayne National Forest and a coalition of towns and villages called the Little Cities of Black Diamonds sponsored several events in recent months that provided benefits to both partners and the public.*



Cheryl Blosser, President of the Little Cities of the Black Diamonds Council poses with Smokey Bear.

Over the past few months the partnership between the Little Cities of Black Diamonds and the Wayne National Forest has flourished. Little Cities of Black Diamonds are a loose coalition of towns and villages which have a common history in coal mining.

Each of the cities sprung up around a coal mine, and many were actual company towns. The group uses their common history as a link to leverage heritage, tourism and economic benefits for the area which is otherwise very financially depressed.

"We've always had a good relationship with them," said Forest Archaeologist Ann Cramer. "But when an opportunity came to help tell their story through the Bob Evans Museum in Rio Grande, we cemented what

was to become a really superb relationship."

Cramer worked with several members of the group to develop a series of panels on the history of coal mines and the people who once mined the hills of southeastern Ohio. Cramer said the Wayne had hosted an earlier exhibit on the Underground Railroad in southeastern Ohio that had been tremendously popular.

She said she wasn't surprised when she was approached to do a similar heritage exhibit. She in turn, asked the Little Cities of Black Diamonds to help.

The group's mission is to collect, understand, and share heritage and culture of the former coal mining communities of Athens, Perry, Hocking, and Morgan Counties. The opportunity to tell the story and promote tourism to the thousands of visitors who toured the Bob Evans Farm in Rio Grande instantly appealed to the group.

"Once we got started it was magical," Cramer said. "Various volunteers and historical societies furnished pictures and artifacts and the display that resulted was incredible!"

Cramer said she had thought it would be impossible to equal the quality and passion captured in the Underground Railroad display.

"I honestly think our display on coal mining was as good or better," she explained. "The story of the miners was told in a way that really touched people's hearts."

Still euphoric with their successful partnership with the Bob Evans exhibit which will be featured in the museum through December 31, 2006, the group completed a publication entitled "At the Glacier's Edge – The Environmental History of the Little Cities of Black Diamonds Region."

The document provides a comprehensive history of the area as well as an assessment of the current assets and issues in the region's natural environment and their vision for the future.

"Coal mining wasn't something that just happened in the past, the legacy of what coal mining did to the area is something today's residents of the Little Cities are still dealing with," Cramer noted. "The legacy of the mines is a constant in the acid mine drainage and water quality problems the area struggles with, the barren gob piles of toxic waste, and the abandoned mine shafts which still present hazards."

Forest Partnership Coordinator Jarel Bartig said the Wayne has an on-going partnership with several groups who are making real headway with the watershed issues.

"This year, building on our work with the display we wanted to expand the ways that we worked with groups in the area," Bartig explained. "We worked with them on a guided field day in August for natural resource professionals to educate the group about the heritage sites, identify and discuss tourism opportunities, and consider environmental restoration opportunities."

Bartig said the first tour was so successful they conducted two other tours, one on September 9 with youth leaders in the area, and the third, a community tour, conducted on September 30. The tours were free to participants and attended by over 90 people between the three events.

"These tours were funded by a grant from the Ohio Environmental Education Fund, and were part of an initiative that LCBD conceived called the Little Cities of the Forest," Cramer explained. "On their guided tours throughout the years, they noticed an increased interest in the environment and the role it has played in history, such as the presence of natural resources like coal paving the way for industry."

She said they also wanted to weave in the story of how the land has healed and the impact of the Wayne National Forest coming into the area, "they consider us a vital part of their region!"

Cramer assisted with the development of a heritage poster on the Little Cities of the Forest area which included a map and photographs from the area. The beautiful poster was an instant hit as was a lithograph done by a local artist to commemorate the Little Cities.

In October, Cramer and Bartig both participated in the 12th Annual Little Cities of Black Diamonds Day. The festival included a youth exhibit, speakers and dozens of environmentally oriented displays. Even Smokey Bear attended and was on hand for a watershed restoration interpretive project that was dedicated on the same day as the festival.

"We're not done," said Bartig. "We're just building momentum!"

She said in the spring they're helping plan the Appalachian Spring Fest and the Little Cities Chautauqua in the summer of 2007.

*For more information contact Teena Ligman at 812-277-3579*