



Mark Hodge (NSS 63563), Virginia

I started caving six years ago. I had just retired after 30 years in the Army and Air Force and moved to Appalachia to start the next phase in life. We bought an old mill and my plan was to restore it. I wasn't into caving then, but shortly after moving in we had a huge rain storm and it caused a resurgence and sink hole to form right behind our house. I already had one cave on my property and a map of it was hanging on the dining room wall. On the map were the names of three local cavers; I called one of them, who lived in a nearby town, and he and another caver came by to look at the new sink hole. That introduced me to cavers, and by extension, to caving.

I live in Highland County, Va., and right in the middle of some of the most spectacular karst terrain in the U.S. I had the very good fortune of not only living close to many great caves, but to also have as neighbors some world class cavers. They took me in and put up with me and eventually I became somewhat competent. This was never a given because I was both afraid of heights and had mild claustrophobia. So my caving journey has been a real mental challenge for me. It obviously agrees with me though; I have caved in excess of 200 days per year since 2012.

I enjoy caving immensely, but even more than that I love the company of cavers. They are an eclectic bunch, and we all rely on each other to stay safe in some pretty challenging conditions. We all take care of each other and that warm cozy feeling of belonging to a special group never gets old. I don't think I'll quit caving regularly until some physical infirmity stops me.

I mostly do project caving and my biggest passion in caving is digging. There is nothing like the feeling of breaking into virgin cave and sharing that experience with others.

I love to share what I know about caving, and to that end I lead quite a few sport trips in various caves in my area. Some of these trips are for people who have never been in a wild cave, and some trips are for experienced cavers who want access to local caves which are otherwise closed. I help out with conservation programs now and then, from clean-ups to bat census trips.

I belong to a number of grottoes and am an officer of the Butler Cave Conservation Society. I consider it the greatest honor to have been asked to join the BCCS; this is a wonderful conservation organization that teaches many new cavers about the beauty and fragility of our karst terrain. I am also the Highland County Director for the Virginia Speleological Survey.

It is an honor to have been asked to run for the NSS BOG. If elected I would apply myself to that task the same as I do with caving. I think being on the BOG would be a great way to learn more about caving and cave issues in other parts of the country and believe it would be an interesting challenge.

My favorite quote about caving: "Caves don't quit; cavers do."

Thank you for your consideration. I can be reached at markhodge@virginiacaves.org.