

Dennis Melko (NSS 36693 CL), Pittsburgh Grotto, Pennsylvania

Why do we cave? We pursue and stay involved with activities we enjoy and that offer us personal benefit. Novelty may drive us for a time. Sometimes it's the love of challenges, the experience of personal growth, or simply aesthetic appreciation. We may develop meaning and purpose that nourishes us. There's more and the reasons vary so much. I'm motivated in having the NSS represent our members in all our various approaches to caving, while maintaining a focus on minimal impact enjoyment and best practices for safety and preservation.

My first involvement with caving was through Scouting. As an adult I continued volunteering with scouting out of Braddock PA wanting to share and enable the positive experiences I received with local youth. I had not heard of the NSS until meeting members of both the Pittsburgh and Loyalhanna grottos quite by accident while out hiking and guiding scouts on visits to caves.

Over the years I became involved in and experienced many facets of organized caving that greatly benefitted me, among them: Photography trips with Ed McCarthy out of WVACS; NCRC week long trainings; exploring caves with other grotto members on our own; first surveying with Gangsta Mappers in West Virginia and Virginia; learning digging techniques from other established and knowledgeable cavers.

I requested the position of chairperson for the Pittsburgh Grotto in 2009 intending 3 years of service. Working with others I successfully improved activities and participation. Work duties then intervened. I did the same again in 2020 taking on the treasurer's position. In 3 years we grew in membership from a half dozen to over 100 dues paying members, plus honorary members, with more than 50 of those new to the grotto, even through the pandemic. We've focused on building membership and a more responsible and organized approach to caving, while maintaining member enjoyment. Most importantly Pittsburgh Grotto governance has been taken up by our younger members, better ensuring continuity. After my 3 years on that board the treasurer position was taken up by a very capable younger member. Locally we are building better.

I've been on the NSS BOG for two years being involved with the fundraising committee as well as working on a project involving a guide for NSS members in working with Scouting BSA and other youth groups. With the funds available to do so I'm glad to have been involved with the decision to pursue a professional CEO to help guide our organization going forward. I feel this will help to focus and stabilize our efforts

Any organization to be important in someone's life needs to provide value. How might we do so?

Encouraging and helping to fund cave conservancies that purchase and manage caves for member and responsible open access is an important undertaking.

Alleviating impediments to participation, such as time and affordability. I'm sensitive towards those having the drive but lacking resources. At the grotto level we've been able to keep our dues affordable and provide a membership discount for current NSS members. We're trying to offer weekday activities

for those without weekends off, or at least encourage those with that same situation to find each other and providing them training and guidance.

As we grow with concern for cave environments and experiencing them with care, it's quite natural to want to teach others the same. Public outreach is an important goal for me. My future plans are to once again enable our grotto in providing presentations to youth groups and college outdoors clubs, teaching the enjoyment of the experience, as well as safety, conservation, and preservation.

I believe that the experience of these local endeavors that I've embraced can help guide me to be effective with efforts and decisions for the NSS.

My professional work experience includes managing various offices with up to 80 employees, giving me experience in planning, personal relations, and budgeting. I've worked as a data analyst in support of operations with the USPS. Starting in 2018 I worked as an emergency preparedness specialist involving continuity of operations across 7 states, requiring me to liaison professionally with various local, state, and federal agencies, before moving back to western Pennsylvania for personal reasons. Volunteerism has been an important part of my life.

I'd like to preserve access for future cavers, to allow them to share in the experiences that have filled me with wonder, challenged me, taught me lessons, provided personal growth, and develop friendships through common interests.