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Emily Huguenin
Ascend WV

Emily Huguenin is the Director of Ascend West Virginia for the Brad and Alys Smith Outdoor Economic Development Collaborative. She began her career in outdoor recreation program development over 15 years ago as an adventure guide in the New River Gorge, and she has been encouraging people to move to West Virginia ever since. Huguenin possesses a wealth of experience in team leadership and program development, which is an asset to the remote worker program as it continues to scale and develop initiatives to take the program to new heights.

Ascend West Virginia and the Outdoor Economy

For many West Virginians, our wild and wonderful natural setting is simply the backdrop to our everyday experience. It can be easy to take for granted the world class rivers, rock climbing, trails, and scenic vistas that are right outside our door.

In April 2021, the Brad and Alys Smith Outdoor Economic Development Collaborative at WVU, in partnership with the West Virginia State Tourism Office and the Wing 2 Wing Foundation, launched the talent attraction and retention program: Ascend West Virginia. Despite COVID, over 80 remote workers and their families have already relocated to the Morgantown Area, the Greenbrier Valley, and the Eastern Panhandle, with more continuing to arrive every month.



In addition to bringing their spending power to the state, these individuals bring their talents and energy to their new communities. Volunteer coaching for youth sports, serving on non-profit boards, shopping locally, and organizing litter clean-ups are just a few of the many ways that Ascenders are meeting people and meeting needs at the same time. Forty-two percent of Ascenders have purchased

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For these newest West Virginians, access to outdoor recreation opportunities was a driving factor in the decision to move. This is consistent with a recent study by Livability Media, which found 45 percent of survey respondents started a new outdoor hobby during the pandemic and 44 percent indicated that access to outside activities influences where they choose to live. As the percentage of fully remote professionals trends upward (LinkedIn Market Research), those who can choose to live anywhere are setting their sights on West Virginia.

homes, and when surveyed after a year of involvement in Ascend West Virginia, 88 percent of respondents reported a 50 percent or higher likelihood that they will remain in the state after the two-year program is complete. “The heart behind this program really boils down to these three principles: community, purpose, and the outdoors,” explains Alys Smith, Co-Founder of the Wing 2 Wing Foundation. “Those who have already made the move to West Virginia are planting roots here and making a difference.”

Convenient access to local trails and the flexibility of a work-from-anywhere career helps Ascenders incorporate outdoor recreation into their everyday wellness. In a recent survey, a Morgantown Area Ascender wrote, “Having so many natural resources and being part of a community that is passionate about outdoor recreation has significantly increased my involvement and ability to participate in outdoor recreation. Also, having other individuals with experience participating in other outdoor activities has provided the opportunity to try things I never had ... and being able to expose my kids to these activities.”

adventure enthusiasts. Greater Elkins will be welcoming its newest residents later this year, while the Morgantown Area, Greenbrier Valley, and the Eastern Panhandle continue to review and select applicants on a rolling basis.

Believing that there is a community for everyone in West Virginia, Ascend West Virginia has strategically selected four communities of emphasis that offer a blend of essential assets, community vibrancy, livability, outdoor resources, and economic factors. Each of the four regions offers a unique setting to appeal to a greater diversity of remote workers.



At the announcement in November 2022 of Ascend West Virginia’s expansion to include Greater Elkins as its fourth location, Brad D. Smith, Co-Founder of the Wing 2 Wing Foundation and President of Marshall University, shared, “When we launched the program, no one could have predicted its immense success. We have recruited a tremendous amount of talent to our mountains, and the applications continue to roll in. We are thrilled to be expanding the program to a fourth location for those seeking a better work-life balance. I look forward to meeting this new group of Ascenders and having them join the family of outdoor recreation enthusiasts who have found their home in the Mountain State.”

At the western gateway to the Monongahela National Forest, which provides a lifetime of outdoor recreation opportunities, and within easy access to six premier ski areas, Greater Elkins is primed to be a hotspot for high

As West Virginia’s new economy continues to evolve, the power of outdoor recreation cannot be taken for granted as a talent retention and recruitment strategy. We continue to watch this trend in other locations such as Utah. According to a 2021 study by the University of Utah, the most important factor for Utah’s tech sector employees deciding to move to or stay in Utah is access to outdoor recreation and public lands. Here, in West Virginia, by welcoming remote workers to live, work, and play in our iconic mountain towns, we can replenish our population with more talented individuals committed to community, purpose, and the outdoors, while economically benefiting the existing population. As our new neighbors discover our state’s natural beauty, perhaps we also will see, with new eyes, the wonder of starry skies, quiet forest trails, and backyards full of fireflies that are drawing people to choose West Virginia. 