



# VIEWS & VISIONS

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## Changing Perceptions by Telling Our State's Story

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Nikki Bowman Mills, a West Virginia native, is the founder and owner of New South Media, Inc., the region's premier storytelling, content development and multimedia publishing company that creates high-caliber lifestyle, travel and business publications for national audiences. Her company, headquartered in Morgantown, West Virginia, publishes the award-winning *WV Living*, *WV Weddings*, *Wonderful West Virginia*, *Explore*, and *Morgantown* magazines. In 2019, she was honored by the West Virginia Hospitality and Travel Association with their Excellence in Tourism Entrepreneurship Award.

When I started New South Media a decade ago, my mission was to create publications that changed perceptions about West Virginia – not just how others from outside the state looked at us, but how we look at ourselves as West Virginians. That mission is as important today as it was 10 years ago. I believe our publications are much more than just magazines – they are community builders, economic development resources and essential marketing tools for attracting tourists and those looking to relocate to our state.

According to the West Virginia Tourism 2018 Annual Report, 21 percent of travelers to West Virginia are West Virginians – the largest travel market for the state. This is significant. West Virginians are our state's most important ambassadors, and we should wear our heritage like a badge of honor. West Virginia's story is our story. And I believe the most important way to drive tourism is to share that story with as many people as possible.

**Stories are powerful. They shape us. They help form what we think, how we feel and who we are. Stories change us. They build better communities.**

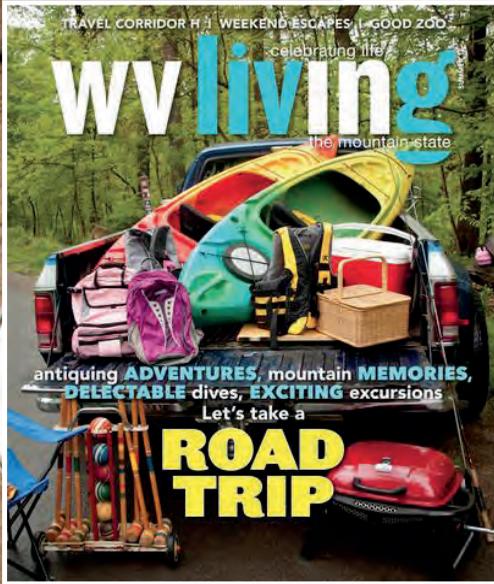
Stories are powerful. They shape us. They help form what we think, how we feel and who we are. Stories change us. They build better communities. Through authentic storytelling in our publications, our goal is to bring West Virginia to life. To inspire action. To create an emotional impact and forge enduring relationships. Through our publications, we



encourage our readers to visit our state's hidden gems and educate them so they can advocate to others on the many reasons why our state is a great place to visit and live.

The West Virginia Tourism Office works very hard to market our assets outside our borders. But recently, I had an experience that made me realize the most brilliant advertising campaign is all for naught if those travelers are greeted by people who don't know their own state. I was in a service station in West Virginia, and a traveler from Canada asked the cashier what she recommended to do in the area. The cashier nonchalantly responded, "There's not much to do here. It's pretty boring." Yikes! My head nearly came off. I immediately interjected, spouting off a list of places the traveler should visit and others in line chimed in offering their suggestions. I ran out to the car and grabbed an old copy of *WV Living* for them to use as inspiration. I even left the cashier a copy of the magazine and encouraged her to read up and educate herself on the many opportunities our state offers. By the time the Canadian couple paid for their gas and snacks, they had a list a mile long of places to visit.

This experience struck a chord with me. As West Virginians we all need to be evangelists for our state. It doesn't matter where you live or what you do for a living. The health of our economy impacts us all. We must be able to share local shop suggestions, travel destinations, restaurant recommendations, or outdoor experiences at



the drop of a hat. In order to do that, it is our responsibility to get out of our daily routines and explore the beauty in our backyard. Take a trip or two to a place in the state you've never been. I guarantee that, by doing so, you'll change your perceptions of what it means to be a West Virginian.

Tourism will continue to transform West Virginia. It is one of our most important engines of economic growth. It provides meaningful employment, attracts new residents and diversifies the economy. But each of us has a responsibility to be better brand ambassadors for our state. Most of us have networks that extend beyond our state's borders. Do you encourage your organizations to schedule their annual meetings in our state? Do you invite your friends and family members to visit, stay and get out and play? Do you have an itinerary of suggestions ready to be shared? Do you participate in local events? Do you shop and eat locally? Do you take weekend trips within our borders?

West Virginia's story is your story. So tell it with pride and tell it often. ▾