

`Round the Mountain
One-Year Anniversary News Release

**`Round the Mountain membership, awareness
grow as organization celebrates first year**

ABINGDON, Va. – November 8, 2007 – In its first year, `Round the Mountain: Southwest Virginia’s Artisan Network, an organization of artisans, agritourism and craft-related businesses, has grown to more than 200 members.

“One of the most visible benefits for these artisans is an Internet presence,” says Diana Blackburn, executive director of `Round the Mountain. “The `Round the Mountain website is opening up the marketplace for these artisans and increasing awareness of their crafts and what’s happening in southwest Virginia.”

`Round the Mountain was created in 2004, as a result of funding from Governor Mark Warner's Virginia Works Initiative. Recognizing the assets of the 19-county region, Governor Warner announced \$100,000 in Appalachian Regional Commission funds to develop an artisan initiative in southwest Virginia to further develop the region as a major cultural and heritage tourism destination.

A group of interested individuals representing state and local government, planning districts, the small business community, arts organizations, economic development, tourism and artisans began the planning process. This group of volunteers interested in providing networking opportunities and marketing resources to artisans in the region began surveying the communities of 19 counties and four cities in southwest Virginia and compiling a database of artisans.

“We started with a database of 1,100 names that included lists of craft vendors from festivals in our area and other arts organizations. We did mailings to those lists and asked artisans to join our `Round the Mountain mailing list,” said Blackburn.

Then last March `Round the Mountain, operated by a volunteer board of directors, sponsored artist gatherings in Galax, Wytheville, Tazewell, Big Stone Gap and Abingdon to come face to face with interested artisans to tell them about this developing network and encourage them to join.

For a \$20-\$40 annual membership fee, members are listed on the `Round the Mountain website – www.roundthemountain.org – in a web-based registry that is a searchable directory of artisans, galleries, studios, craft shops, farms, craft resources and craft events in the 19-county RTM region.

Plus, each member who chooses to participate is featured on an individual profile page where they can include their contact information, hours of operation, a description of their work, their studio or farm, a photo, and other locations where their goods can be

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purchased or seen. Members can also be included in the rotating "Featured Member" feature on the `Round the Mountain website homepage.

Other general membership benefits include newsletters, referrals, event calendars, inclusion in regional promotions, and educational and networking opportunities.

Networking is important to Dwight Overturf and wife Rhonda who operate Pleasant Hill Farm in Wythe County. They became members after attending one of the community meetings in Galax. "Round the Mountain exposes you to others who have similar problems and situations in telling others about their business. It's so important to get the word out."

Since joining and being featured on the RTM website, Overturf said he has seen an increase in visitors to his flower farm, where customers are handed a Mason jar and a cutting tool and instructed to "fill it up with all the flowers you can fit into the jar."

"I think people looking for a weekend getaway, especially from surrounding states like North Carolina, look at the `Round the Mountain website and they see the variety of places to visit, and we're not too far away," said Overturf.

`Round the Mountain membership also offers artisans a menu of fee-based services including the chance to be included in the RTM Regional Artisan Trail Network that is under development.

The proposed artisan trail is a network of driving trails that will connect visitors to artisan studios, galleries, and creative points of interest in southwest Virginia.

Quilter Pat Houck of Rose Hill in Lee County is among one of the first to join `Round the Mountain. She participates on the craft coordinating committee with potter Ellen Shankin of Floyd, and both emphasize the value of RTM in raising awareness and bringing attention to southwest Virginia artisans and their crafts.

"Round the Mountain has changed my life," said Houck, whose husband, Allen, a banker, also is a woodworker and a member of RTM. "I have been so personally involved by serving on the board and I see the interest and passion of all those sitting around that table."

A southwest Virginia native who lived away from this area for a number of years, Houck said the value of `Round the Mountain is the exposure it is bringing to this region. "There are so many talents that were not being showcased and now they are."

Another benefit of membership in `Round the Mountain is eligibility for jurying for, Heartwood: Southwest Virginia's Artisan Gateway, the artisan center to be built in Abingdon near Exit 14 of I-81. The center is to be a gateway and serve as a portal to connect tourists with the region's artisans.

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Shankin, the Floyd potter, said `Round the Mountain is important to artisans. “We’re finding out that people are willing to travel down these dirt roads and look for these wonderful things.”

The `Round the Mountain service area includes Bland, Buchanan, Carroll, Dickenson, Floyd, Franklin, Giles, Grayson, Lee, Montgomery, Patrick, Pulaski, Russell, Scott, Smyth, Tazewell, Washington, Wise, and Wythe counties, and the cities of Bristol, Galax, Norton and Radford.

Those interested in membership in `Round the Mountain can enroll online at www.roundthemountain.org. For more information, contact Diana Blackburn, Executive Director, `Round the Mountain, 851 French Moore Jr. Boulevard – Suite 145 Abingdon, VA 24210; 276.492.2080 or by email dblackburn@roundthemountain.org.
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