

# Mountain Xpress

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## Bring (or make) the kids

### LEAF was conceived with families first in mind

by Brian Sarzynski

In a metamorphosis worthy of Kafka himself, the last Lake Eden Arts Festival turned my kids' oft-tossed toddler tantrums into tempers of sweet tranquility.

The transformation started one Friday back in October, as my wife, Anne, and I packed up the car to head out to the fall installment of LEAF in nearby Black Mountain.

We'd heard from friends about the wonders of the festival – particularly the beauty of its Camp Rockmont setting in the shadows of the Seven Sisters mountain range. Yet it was to be our first camping excursion with our daughters, Grace and Ella.

At 4 and 2, respectively, the two have managed to shake up our lives with an endless stream of soiled diapers, early bedtimes and even-earlier wake-up calls. Gone is the spontaneity of Anne's and my childless past, when jumping in the car and trekking to points unknown for weekend jaunts was the norm. In its place has come routine and order, with our now-infrequent trips requiring the logistical planning of D-Day.

Standing beside the car that October day, I shuddered at the sight of our supplies for the three-day festival: food, clothing (everything from bathing suits to fleece jackets), tents, sleeping bags in nearly every Lifesavers-candy color, assorted toys and books, and cooking gear – plus, of course, the occasional indispensable knickknack (favorite cups, blankets, etc.).

With trunk tied shut, we set off.

### Where even the weather behaves

LEAF, now 9 years old and launching its 17th incarnation this weekend, has steadily carved out a reputation as one of the country's classiest small festivals. Its coordinators deftly blend world-beat/roots-music performers with dancing, crafts, a big-stakes poetry slam (to the beat of a \$1,000 top prize), and healing-arts workshops, striking a tricky balance between sensory stimulation and soulful relaxation.

Sierra Hollister, who's been coming to LEAF since its first year, is now the event's director of healing arts. I ran into her at the fall festival as her oldest child, 7-year-old Zach, was playing his violin with a group of other young musicians. Hollister revealed a bit of family history when we caught up with each other again during a recent phone interview: "Zach was conceived at LEAF, and we've been taking the kids [there] every year. There is a family at LEAF that goes beyond blood family.

"I recognize other people's children," she explains. "We've watched them grow over the years, and we've become a family to each other. Zach's at the age now where he wants to run off on his own and have a meeting spot for later. I can't imagine letting him do that anywhere else.

"The kids have their LEAF friends who come from Virginia, Georgia and Tennessee, and they only get to see each other twice a year [at Camp Rockmont]. When we come home after three days, I'm exhausted – but the kids can't stop talking about the next LEAF."

The biannual event's greatest success, Hollister points out, may be that other small festivals now routinely copy the LEAF formula.

It's a hard-won model of success, admits Jennifer Pickering, the festival's director and founder: LEAF is the product of year-round planning and a team of 500 volunteers and 200 staff members.

"There's lots of little details, and we're always reviewing what works and what doesn't," she explains.

For one thing, the five covered stages and the assortment of rustic buildings for dancing and workshops means Mother Nature can be enjoyed – and not feared.

"Regardless of weather," notes Pickering, "we go at full speed."

And that fine spirit of preparedness has a way of catching on. My family ended up not using one-tenth of what we brought to LEAF last fall. The cache of supplies stayed unpacked in our tent.

We were fortified, instead, by nature and community – soothed, you might say, in the warm embrace of the ancient Seven Sisters.

### **LEAF springs eternal**

This season's Lake Eden Arts Festival runs Friday, May 7 through Sunday, May 9 at Camp Rockmont in Black Mountain. Gate price for a full-weekend ticket (including camping) is \$115/adults, \$95/youth. Reduced-price advance tickets are available through May 5; community passes for local residents and day-only passes (no camping) are available all weekend long at varying prices. Visit [www.theleaf.com](http://www.theleaf.com), or call (828) 68-MUSIC for details.