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Parsons named Joe Ford Nature Center executive director

By Devinn Winkleman Messenger-Inquirer
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New executive director Jessie Parsons stands at the trailhead of the Wild Fern Trail at the Joe Ford Nature Center.
Photo by Greg Eans, Messenger-Inquirer | geans@messenger-inquirer.com

The Joe Ford Nature Center has a new executive director — Jessie Parsons.

Parsons graduated from Owensboro High School and then from Western Kentucky University, where she earned a bachelor's degree in psychology 2015.

After college, she worked for OASIS women's shelter and volunteered with New Beginnings, a non-profit organization that specializes in providing confidential crisis and long-term therapy services to sexual assault survivors.

Parsons said taking over as the new executive director is very different from her past positions.

But underneath her psychology background, she's always had a fondness for nature.

"Ever since I was a kid, I've loved nature," she said. "I've always been drawn to nature and animals, and I was that kid that would pick up the bugs and bring them to school."

She decided to apply for the position because it looked like a great opportunity.

When she applied, she didn't expect to get a call, but when it came, she said she was surprised.

Before Parsons was named the Nature Center's executive director, Mike Robinson, vice chair of the nature center's board, said the running between Parsons and one other applicant was so close that the full board wanted to interview both candidates in person as a final decider.

During the one-hour interview, the board asked Parsons a battery of questions with Parsons doing the same to the board.

"She had two pages of questions that she wanted us to answer, and we couldn't answer all of the questions," Robinson said.

During the interview, Parsons said it felt like she was interviewing them and she didn't know how they were going view that. But her questions brought to the board new light on what the nature center needed.

Along with showing strong confidence in speaking with the board, she also demonstrated a lot of life experiences, a large range of leadership opportunities and was very personable, Robinson said.

She's also eager to learn, can articulate a message very well and likes to hike and participate in outdoor activities with her husband and children.

"And she had no problems speaking to the seven of us that were there; so we felt very strongly about her abilities," he said.

When Parsons was offered the position, she said she was really surprised by the news because there were so many other interested candidates.

She also felt that she didn't carry the type of background that the board was expecting from an executive director.

When Parsons accepted the new position, she was given a key to the nature center and started her first day on June 14 to get acclimated to her new responsibilities with the first being to rearrange the office.

With COVID-19 numbers lessening, Parsons said this is a chance for the nature center to start anew beginning with the return of the Wednesday summer camps in July.

From there, she wants to expand on what has already been built and get the community more involved with the nature center.

"We're kind of in a corner, and for several years, it feels like we haven't been getting the recognition I really think the center has the potential for and deserves, and I'm hoping to change that," she said.

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