

Why the NSS is Worth More than Going to Five Movies a Year

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Have you ever noticed that going caving is similar to going to a movie theater? You go with your friends into a darkened chamber, and watch amazing scenes unfold before you. You have to move around in dim light, the floor is often sticky, you are simultaneously cramped (in those chairs) and in a cavernous room. You take your food with you, and, if you are responsible, take your trash out at the end. The guides use flashlights. Bright lights alternate with stygian darkness. Things happen which play on your emotions: things happen which are sublime, ridiculous or scare the willies out of you. You have to consider when and where to take restroom breaks. Show caves sometimes carry theater analogies to extremes, with similar tickets, music, light shows, special events and so forth.

But the major difference between wild caving and going to the theater is that when all is said and done, is that you come out grimy, perhaps muddy, with spent batteries, tired, and usually smiling with memories to last a lifetime. Why? Because the caving was real, and not just make-believe. Like the movies, you start out as a bit player in someone else's show, but can work your way up to producer, director, or even the star. No one determines how far you can go in caving except yourself and your abilities and interests.

The only requirements are a love of and care for caves and karst, willingness to learn and try new things, and the ability to tolerate diversity while working with like minded others towards common goals. That's it. You don't have to be a pretty face or have a great bod (some athletic ability helps, but caving is the only pursuit I know where there is no disgrace in falling down, as long as you get up and keep going). Just as great actors come from all walks of life, so do cavers- from homemakers to construction workers, to professors to civil servants. Rich or poor or somewhere in between, there is a place for nearly everyone in caving.

Like the limelight? There is plenty of that available, from grotto officers to the National Board of Governors. Would you rather work behind the scenes? Plenty opportunities exist here, too. I've served at the grotto level, as National Conservation Task Force Coordinator (the job is mostly administrative, and isn't nearly as big or hard to do as the name implies) and in the current positions indicated above.

As the Geo2 editor, I am responsible for three issues per year of the Geology and Geography Section electronic and print newsletter. Sound like a chore? It's ideal for someone with degrees in geology and writing, with a work background in printing and publishing. By taking this, I've had to learn desktop publishing skills which add to the ol' resume, as well as getting to know some of the geoscience related BNCs (Big Name Cavers). For the Conservation and Cave Management Section, serving on the exec board keeps one abreast of major cave conservation issues in the United States, while at the same time, being able to have one's voice listened to with a small bit of more weight than someone in the peanut gallery.

Have you ever watched the credits on a movie? I mean ALL the credits? Sure, the big name stars get top billing, and the producer and director. But just think of the number of skilled craftspeople involved in

making that movie: the extra actors, the hairdressers, the light crew, the set-builders, the makeup artists, the film editors, the special effects guys and gals, the diplomats who arrange for the use of exotic locations, and the people who give permission for the movie to be made there. The reason many movies cost millions of dollars to make is the sheer number of people it takes to make it who never appear on-screen. With the NSS, these people are US. In order to work on the movie, most of these skilled workers must belong to the guild, or a particular craft association before they're hired. Especially if this occupation is their life's work, the small dues they pay are repaid many times over in enjoyment and accomplishment, as their name rolls across the screen of many movies, whether in big type or small.

So we come to the point of this article. When asked to write something by the Membership Committee, I pondered--well, what IS the NSS worth to me? I've been a member for 18 years now. Without the NSS I would have never met cavers from Ukraine and Russia, nor traveled to such diverse locations as Maine, Florida, Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee and Michigan, spending my vacations at Convention. I would be much less diplomatic--working with the many individuals in the NSS from all over the country hones one's skills like no other school I know. I likely would never have returned to school to get a geology degree, nor would I know the professional associates whose friendship I cherish. I would have missed out on the opportunity to acquire new skills and dear friends while serving in various volunteer capacities. I most likely would have a different husband, if I had one at all (I met him at a grotto meeting, and we were married in a cave, by a fellow caver.) In short, I would have been a very different person, leading a very different life.

To see a first-run movie in Missouri these days costs \$8.50 a ticket for an evening show, and \$6.50 for a matinee. For slightly less than the cost of 3 evening shows and two matinees a year, I can be an NSS member, and star in my own show every available weekend. That's quite a bargain, even if I have to furnish my own Jube Jels and popcorn.

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