

## COOKEVILLE CAVER FEATURED IN NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

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Kristen Bobo prepares to go down into a cave.

Cookeville is getting national coverage this month in National Geographic Magazine, thanks to Cookeville resident Kristen Bobo. Bobo is a caver who has explored more than 700 caves all over the country and many right here in Tennessee.

"I certainly wouldn't call it a hobby. It is my life. I work in caves; I play in caves," said Bobo.

She not only surveys caves for the private and public sector, she also is one of the

leading cave gate builders in the United States, having built more than 50 of the gates that keep out those who would steal or destroy the caves' valuables like ancient human footprints, pottery or the delicate animals and organisms that live there.

It's not easy work. Just exploring the caves is a profession filled with danger. Bobo has broken multiple bones, suffered from hypothermia and even broken her back after a particularly nasty fall. Yet she still can't resist returning underground where she has seen beautiful cave formations, prehistoric cave drawings and even ancient burial grounds.

Though the article in National Geographic is in the June edition of the magazine, the interview actually took place about a year ago, Bobo says. The author of the article, Mark Jenkins, called her one day and told her that he had heard she was doing "some great stuff over here" and wanted a first hand look at her caveing journeys.

"It was a shock -- not because I'm not known in caving; I am known pretty well in the caving community -- but because they wanted to come to Cookeville for a week and cave with me," Bobo said.

Jenkins came along with photographer Stephen Alvarez and they followed Bobo and her fellow cavers around Tennessee, Alabama and Georgia for a whole week. The article presents Jenkins' personal experience with the team in a particular spot named Jaguar Cave in Tennessee. He helped "push" the cave, traveling from passages already explored into virgin territory which man had never before set foot on.

"Mark wanted to experience what it was like to be where no man has been," Bobo said. "That is so rare on this earth. You can't really find a place on the surface of the earth where somebody hasn't been. So to break into something with not a single footprint, crystals growing out of the walls -- it's amazing. We wanted to show him what that felt like, why it's so addictive and why we keep doing it, what draws us to it."

Bobo says that Jenkins was fortunate that they found so much virgin territory during their exploration into the caves. Breaking into virgin territory is not all that common and cannot be planned, she explained. However, she believes that by the tone of excitement in his article, Jenkins knew exactly how special his experiences were.

"He got the fever," Bobo said. "You could tell it in the article, but I could see it in his eyes. He was just on fire. I could hardly hold him back."

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