

MOUNTAINS

Trump endorses Robinson for NC governor

Gary D. Robertson
ASSOCIATED PRESS

RALEIGH – Donald Trump has endorsed North Carolina Lt. Gov Mark Robinson for governor, fulfilling a pledge the former president made several months ago.

At a rally Saturday in Greensboro, Trump compared Robinson, who is Black, to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., the famed civil rights leader. Trump referred to Robinson as “Martin Luther King on steroids.”

Trump said Robinson wasn’t sure how to respond when Trump compared him to the legendary civil rights leader, telling him: “I think you’re better than Martin Luther King. I think you are Martin Luther King times two.”

“You should like it,” Trump said. Trump listed Robinson among several candidates that people should vote for in Tuesday’s North Carolina Republican primaries, saying “they have my complete and total endorsement.” Trump is also on the primary ballot as he seeks to all but eliminate his last remaining rival, former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley, from mathematical contention for the GOP nomination.

Despite the lack of a formal endorsement, the ex-president’s support combined with strong fundraising and popularity among the GOP’s base have helped make Robinson the GOP’s front-runner for the gubernatorial nomination.

Robinson’s primary rivals – State Treasurer Dale Folwell and trial attorney

Bill Graham – have questioned his ability to win the general election in November, particularly in light of harsh comments on LGBTQ+ rights and other issues.

Trump called Robinson, who also spoke at Saturday’s rally, an “incredible gentleman” and “great, natural speaker.” Trump recalled, with some imprecision, how Robinson rose to fame following a 2018 speech to the Greensboro City Council in support of gun rights and police that went viral.

That led Robinson to a National Rifle Association board position and being elected the state’s first Black lieutenant governor in 2020 in his first bid for public office.

Robinson, a Greensboro native, said in a news release that he was “humbled” to have Trump’s endorsement and

looked forward to working with Trump to “lead our united Republican ticket to victory in November, and get our state and country back on track.”

Voters also will choose a Democratic nominee for governor on Tuesday. The field includes Attorney General Josh Stein and former state Supreme Court Associate Justice Mike Morgan. Term-limited Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper endorsed Stein months ago.

State Democratic Party Chair Anderson Clayton said the endorsement wasn’t a surprise. North Carolina doesn’t need a leader in Robinson who would “prioritize job-killing culture wars that take our state backward,” she added in a news release.

Statewide elections are usually close affairs in the nation’s ninth-largest state.

Tremont Writers Conference returns



Word from the Smokies
Frances Figart
Columnist

Walker Valley near Townsend, Tennessee, is one of the most strikingly beautiful havens of biodiversity in Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Nestled here just beside the Middle Prong of the Little River and not far from the impressive Spruce Flats Falls, Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont has been connecting people to nature for more than 50 years — and many of those people have been writers.

“Writing and literature, broadly speaking, are nothing new to Tremont,” says Jeremy Lloyd, the institute’s manager of field programs and collegiate studies. “One can trace the literary arts back to our earliest beginnings when students wrote poetry each day in their outdoor ‘sit spots.’ One also pictures the allure of our wild setting inspiring people to set pen to paper long before Tremont existed as an outdoor school and education center.”

It’s fitting, then, that last autumn, as colorful leaves were swirling down from the tall trees in Walker Valley, the Tremont institute held its very first writers conference in partnership with Smokies Life.

The chance to embark on this immersive retreat into the wilderness drew more than a hundred applicants from all over the country.

Twenty writers were selected to spend five days tucked away deep in the Smokies while being housed, fed, coached, and led by Tremont staff and author workshop leaders.

“We look forward to doing it all over again later this year when we’ll welcome back Frank X Walker as our guest author as well as workshop leaders Maurice Manning in poetry, Monic Ductan in fiction, and David Brill in nonfiction,” says Lloyd, who is the co-coordinator of the conference along with this author. The conference is now accepting applications.

This year’s leader of the fiction cohort, Monic Ductan, was born and raised in Georgia and now lives in Cookeville, Tennessee, where she teaches literature and creative writing at Tennessee Technological University.

Her story collection “Daughters of Muscadine” (2023) focuses on a group of working-class Black women and families in rural Georgia. She is currently working on a novel about a 911 dispatcher who uncovers corruption in her small-town police department when her police officer boyfriend shoots an



Abi Ramanan, a 2023 Tremont Writers Conference participant, reads from her writing in fiction at the Open Mic and Happy Hour activity on the third day of the retreat.



At the Tremont Writers Conference, certified naturalist guides will lead conference participants on afternoon hikes to see the flora and fauna of the Smokies. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY MICHELE SONS



7 Mornings at the Tremont Writers Conference are spent working with author workshop leaders in small cohorts like this one in fiction led by Annette Saunooke Clapsaddle, author of “Even as We Breathe.”

unarmed Black man.

“I feel that I get more writing done when I’m surrounded by people who are excited about their own work,” Ductan says. “I belong to an online writers’ group right now, and they are all holding me accountable by expecting pages from me each month. I think working with writers at Tremont will provide that same inspiration. Reading what others are writing will inspire me to work harder to finish this novel of mine.”

Ductan won the 2019 Denny C. Plattner Award for her essay “Fantasy Worlds” and the 2021 Love Merit Prize in

the annual Stories That Need to Be Told contest from Tulip Tree Publishing. Her writing has appeared in numerous publications and will be included in the forthcoming anthology “Troublesome Rising: A Thousand-Year Flood in Eastern Kentucky.”

“I’m always excited to read the works for the workshop, but most importantly I look forward to the conversations,” she says. “I always learn a lot from hearing other authors talk about writing.”

Leading this year’s poetry cohort, Maurice Manning teaches at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky,

and for the Warren Wilson College MFA Program in Swannanoa. He is currently working on what he calls a “batch” of poems set in rural Kentucky borrowing themes from the biblical psalms.

“My content tends to be recurrent — hills and trees, shadows and distance,” he says. “The real labor is connected to form: how to express the content in new ways, how that expression can sound and feel, and how all of it can be arranged to surprise or resonate. At the Tremont conference I’ll be sure to ask participants in my workshop to consider the relation in their work between content and form.”

Manning has published eight collections of poetry, the most recent being “Snakedoctor” (2023). His fourth book, “The Common Man” (2010), was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, and his poems have been published in The New Yorker and Time. He and producer Steve Cody have also published 10 episodes of “The Grinnin’ Possum Podcast,” featuring original poetry, old-time music, and history.

“I’m drawn to the connection this conference makes between nature and art,” he says. “It is a connection I’ve tried to make in my poetry, a vital one I believe. I’m also attracted to the Tremont approach to hands-on learning. Being in a natural setting will allow participants to absorb visceral detail and knowledge — landscape, geology, trees and plants, animals and birds, waterways, the heavens and stars. In poetry, things of nature are both facts and symbols. All knowledge begins in nature, from observation and study.”

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Primary

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one-half of N.C.'s most westerly counties, including Buncombe, Henderson and Madison – the Republican primary is much more simple, and lopsided. On the ballot are one-term Congressman Chuck Edwards of Henderson County and political newcomer Christian Reagan, a cowboy-hat wearing mortgage broker from sparsely populated Clay County on the Georgia border. The winner will face Democratic state legislator Caleb Rudow of Asheville in the Nov. 5 general election.

"In many of the other congressional districts around the state, because we do have quite a few retirements, you have a lot of candidates," said UNC Charlotte political science professor Eric Heberlig. "In some cases none of the candidates are particularly well known, so it makes it harder to predict who is going to be competitive."

"But the 11th District, it is really a classic David and Goliath race, and it would be a true upset for Reagan to win," Heberlig said.

Reagan, 61, has said he would cut the debt and end Ukraine aid, calling it a "slush fund for the global elites." Seeking to get to the political right of Edwards, he has described himself as an "America First" and MAGA candidate, using ex-President Donald Trump's monikers. In their Jan. 13 debate, Reagan labeled the congressman one of

the "elite," but retracted the comment after Edwards, who experienced poverty as a child, expressed indignation. He later elaborated in a Jan. 17 post on X (formerly Twitter).

"During the Congressional debate last weekend, when I said Chuck Edwards was part of the political 'Elite', I meant to say that he is part of the political 'Establishment': a group of politicians who 'pretend' to be conservative," he said.

Edwards, with a bootstraps success story of working in a McDonald's as a youth and now owning multiple franchises of the restaurant as well as a real estate investment company, has sought to emphasize hard work and acumen. Though he too has tried to present himself as an outsider, Edwards quickly got appointed to a coveted seat on the appropriations committee. And while he was critical of his predecessor, Trump-aligned Rep. Madison Cawthorn, including for failings in constituent services, he has been careful not to directly criticize the ex-president.

"When I first got elected, I heard NC-11 loud and clear: you want a member who will work for you," Edwards said in a Feb. 28 X post. "That's why I created the only mobile office in Congress, the 'Carolina Cruiser' and held over 300 office visits to connect with you. The people of NC-11 will always be my number one priority."

Both have backed hardline border and immigration policies, a standard of Trump and now the Republican par-

ty.

Heberlig, the UNC Charlotte professor, said Reagan faces the disadvantages of low name recognition as a first-time candidate and residing in a county far from the district's population centers. Edwards, meanwhile, served three terms in the state Senate prior to Congress and lives in Henderson County, a populous area known for Republican politics.

In many of the state's GOP primaries there is little daylight between candidates on issues. Two things that can raise their profiles, Heberlig said, are endorsements – particularly by Trump, the de facto party leader – and funding, which can come in the form of a Super PAC willing to spend large sums boosting a candidate or denigrating another. But Reagan has neither.

According to federal election reports filed Feb. 14, Edwards had raised more than \$950,000 and after expenditures had \$312,000 cash on hand. Reagan had raised \$33,000 and spent most of it, leaving him with \$1,200.

Edwards is facing a complaint over alleged misuse of a taxpayer funded mailing program and mistakenly used a Trump-era photo of migrants massed at the border to criticize President Joe Biden. But those pale compared to the scandal-ridden single term of Cawthorn, who was caught twice trying to get on a plane with a gun and fined by the ethics committee, said Catawba College political science professor Mike Blitzer.

"Edwards hasn't made any major is-

sues or scandals in the district, and while first-term incumbents tend to be the most vulnerable, I don't see anything nearing that level of vulnerability for Edwards," Bitzer said.

Fellow political science professor, Chris Cooper at Western Carolina University said Edwards has also done a 180-degree turn in constituent services from Cawthorn, who abandoned district offices where residents seek help with federal issues such as passports and problems with social security checks.

"I think what Christian Reagan has going for him is the best name in Republican politics," Cooper said, riffing off the religious and presidential references.

"He's done the smart thing. He's plastered his name on every roadside in Western North Carolina. But he hasn't really been able to articulate why voters should pick him over Edwards. He has, perhaps to his credit not run a nasty campaign. But if you are a Republican voter he hasn't really given you a reason to change your vote from the last time."

Joel Burgess has lived in WNC for more than 20 years, covering politics, government and other news. He's written award-winning stories on topics ranging from gerrymandering to police use of force. Got a tip? Contact Burgess at jburgess@citizentimes.com, 828-713-1095 or on Twitter @AVLreporter. Please help support this type of journalism with a subscription to the Citizen Times.

Conference

Continued from Page 2A

Tremont is probably best known for the way it weaves natural history and science into its programming. So, the conference capitalizes on that strength, offering afternoon hikes and other outdoor activities during which certified naturalist guides introduce the visiting writers to the fascinating flora and fauna of the Smokies.

At last year's conference, working in tandem with the author workshop leaders over the five days was guest author Richard Powers, who came to the Smok-

ies seven years ago for a what he wittily called a "three-hour tour" to do research for his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, "The Overstory," and decided to stay. On Saturday afternoon, when the group had reached the crescendo of their conference bond – all shyness and trepidation having been swept aside like falling leaves – Powers gave a Craft Talk during which he attempted to synthesize and download for the group everything he had learned about creating works of writing over the past four decades. It was a masterful and interactive lecture, probably not unlike many he gave at Stanford or the University of Illinois during his illustrious career as a teacher of literature.

One of last year's author workshop leaders, Frank X Walker, is the first African American to be named Kentucky Poet Laureate. He will be joining us this year in the avuncular role that Powers occupied during the inaugural conference.

Walker is talented at applying the general principles of poetic writing to fiction and nonfiction forms. He and Smokies Life author David Brill will be featured in an upcoming companion column about the Tremont Writers Conference.

Bill Griffin, author of "Snake Den Ridge: A Bestiary," wrote of last year's event: "I'd never attended a writer's conference, and after this I'll never at-

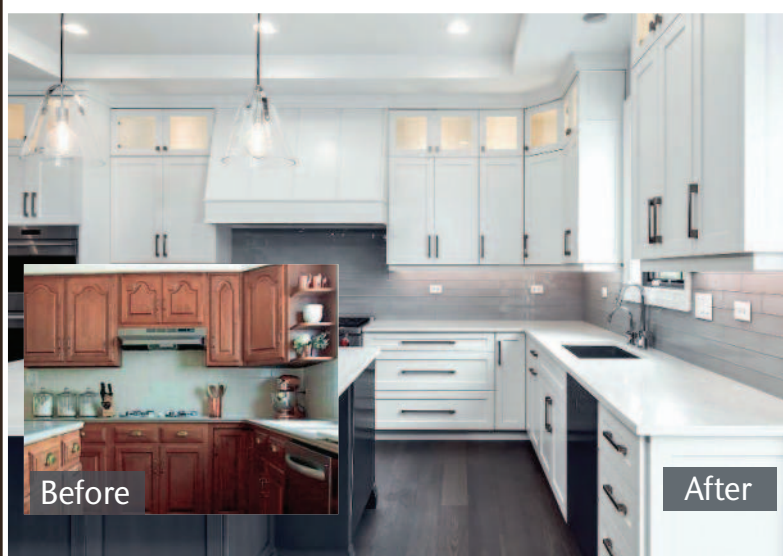
tend another because once you've experienced perfection, you're full. Thanks for filling us all to overflowing!"

Applications to the Oct. 23–27, 2024, Tremont Writers Conference are being accepted now through April 30. See faculty bios, view the full schedule of activities, read detailed guidelines, and apply today at writers.gsmiit.org.

Frances Figart is the creative services director for the 29,000-member Smokies Life, a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting the scientific, historical, and interpretive activities of Great Smoky Mountains National Park by providing educational products and services to park visitors. For more information, visit SmokiesLife.org.

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