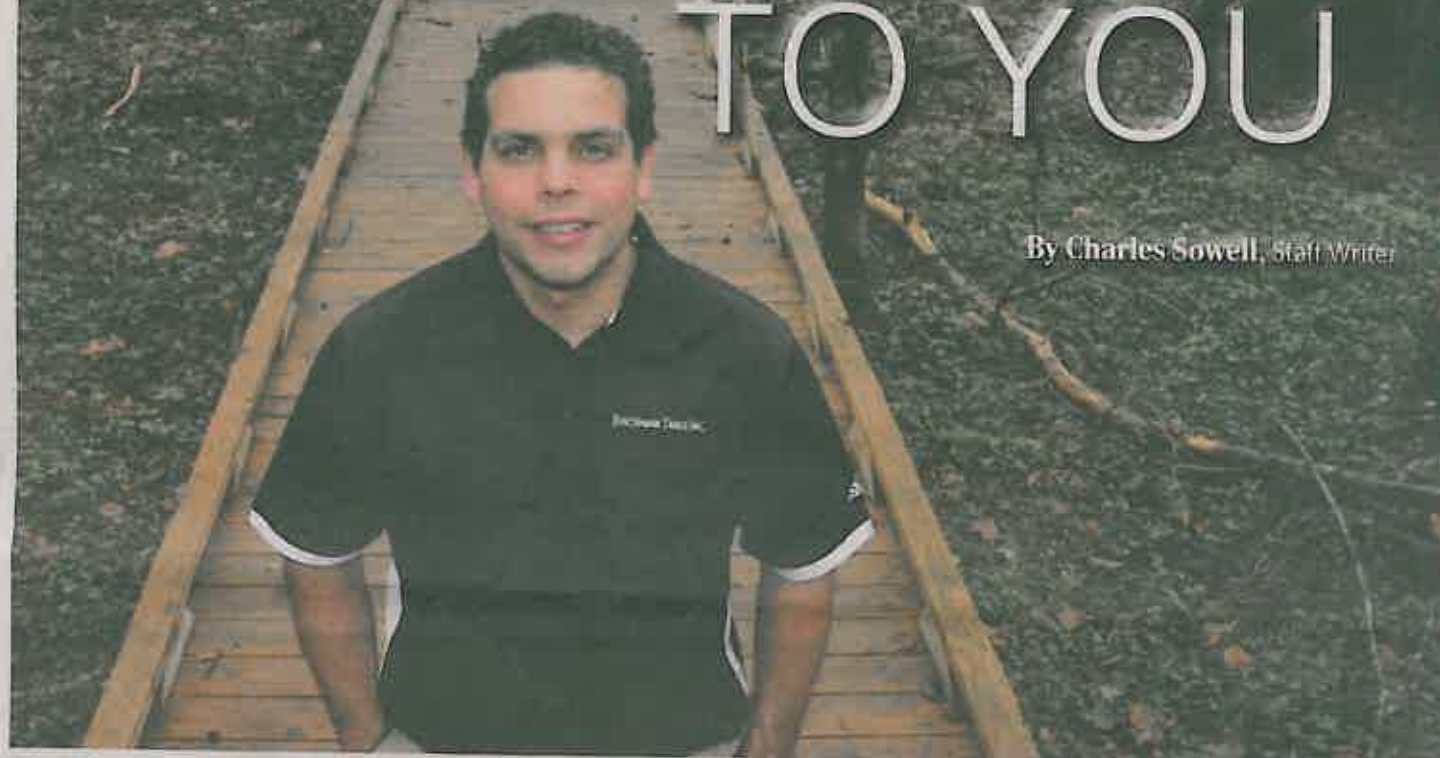


# Happy trails, TO YOU

By Charles Sowell, Staff Writer



Deno Contos, principle of Benchmark Trails Inc., stands on one of the boardwalks his company has constructed at Lake Conestee Nature Park. The company is involved in several projects in the Upstate. Greg Beckner/Staff

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**I**t was a summer spent hacking out sections on the Appalachian Trail that lured Deno Contos out of the kitchen and into a career in the trail building business.

"I'm a Greek-American from Charlotte," Contos said while strolling on a new section of trail at Conestee Nature Park just finished by his company. "In the early 1990s I took time off from the culinary course I was taking in Atlanta to work on the AT and just fell in love with it."

The work was brutal, done the sweaty old school way using hand tools to grub, cut and dig in some of the most remote areas the Eastern Seaboard has to offer.

Blisters and all, Contos was hooked.

Trail building companies do not exactly fill the "T" section of the Yellow Pages. Benchmark Trails Inc. has a regional reputation for quality up and down the East Coast and as far West as Boulder, Colo., where Contos is working on a city trail system. ➤

➤ Jeff Beacham, executive director at Conestee, raves about the quality of Contos' work.

"He always gives you way more than the contract calls for," Beacham said pointing out how Contos had naturalized a section of trail at Conestee by going through a boulder field instead of around it.

Currently, Contos splits his time between completing work at Conestee and a new nine-mile section of bike trail on the Georgia side of Strom Thurmond Lake.

Contos builds lots of trails in lots of places across the Upstate. He built a portion of the Palmetto Trail running through Croft, done trail building seminars for the state Department of Natural Resources at the Glendale Outdoor Leadership School and built trails at Peter's Creek Heritage Trust Preserve near the Pacolet River in Spartanburg County.

He's also worked at Jones Gap State Park, Mountain Bridge Wilderness, Paris Mountain, Table Rock, Jocassee Gorges. Examples of his distinctive style of trail building can be found up and down the Savannah River basin.

But even with the incredible variety topography that he works in - everything from cypress swamps to rock faces - Contos says Table Rock state park is his favorite.

"There's just something about the quality of the stonework at those old WPA projects that gets to me," he said. "We recently did some work on some stone steps and walls up there. There's something awesome about raising a stone step and realizing the dirt underneath hasn't seen the light of day since the Great Depression."

Contos said he moved his company from Atlanta to Greenville because the region has lots of environmentally conscious groups (like **Upstate Forever** and the Nature Conservancy) and because the state Department of Natural Resources had lots of work for him to do.

But before there was Benchmark, of course, there were dues to be paid.

Contos spent a couple of summers working as a volunteer on the AT. Then came some work at \$6 an hour on various projects that basically covered costs of blister remedies plus all he could eat.

He did a stint with his own landscape design business before landing a contract with state DNR for trail maintenance and education in the late 1990s.

Trail building as a business isn't quite the same as working as an altruistic volunteer, Contos said.

"We have to use machinery in order to make production," he said. "But we use small earth moving units and do lots of shovel time

to naturalize the cuts and excavations."

Trail design isn't just about hacking out a path on the side of a hill, either. Contos builds elevated wooden walkways over swamps and creeks. He cuts grooves into granite to make steps and, always, is conscious of the natural world around him.

"Notice how the trail slopes gently from the high side to the low side of the hill," Contos said, pointing to runoff parks left in the earth by recent rains. "That's what we want in a well designed trail."

There should be no sections of trail that allow water to build force when it runs off. It keeps gullies from washing out the center of a trail.

Contos uses lots of ups and downs in many sections of his trails.

"Partially, that's because mountain bikers love them, but it is also a great way to keep down erosion on trails that will never see a bike," he said.

The payoff comes in more than a paycheck.

"I remember coming to within about 10 feet of a bobcat while working on a section of trail outside of Boulder," he said. "It was one of those magical moments when the cat and I seemed to be on the same wavelength. It was way cool."

Contact Charles Sowell at 679-1208 or [csowell@greenvillejournal.com](mailto:csowell@greenvillejournal.com).