

An Adventure of a Lifetime

Gayle Hazelwood, the top-ranking Black woman in the National Park Service, wants us to explore careers off the beaten path **BY NICK CHILES | PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMIE HOPPER**



Hazelwood says practicing good listening skills can help you get ahead.

When Gayle Hazelwood's colleagues call her a "people person," it's not hard to figure out why. Her ebullient personality and effortless smile envelope you upon meeting her. Both traits have served her well as she has moved steadily up the ladder at the National Park Service.

Hazelwood, 50, says she has been able to take advantage of opportunities that arose unexpectedly, but surely her passion and leadership skills had something to do with her rise in the federal agency. As deputy director of the National Park Service's Southeast Region, located in Atlanta, Hazelwood manages 20 national parks—from Kentucky to Louisiana to Florida—as well as parks in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

"The secret to my success was people taking me under their wing," says Hazelwood. "There's no luck. You must listen, ask questions and learn. With a career, you have to allow yourself to be a lifelong learner, and you have to share the passion for what you do with others."

That passion can influence others' career choices. Lead Park Ranger

Marty Smith, who works at the Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site, describes Hazelwood as one of the best leaders he's ever worked for. "She teaches and leads by example," says Smith, who was hired as a permanent employee by Hazelwood. "She put me in a position and then taught me not to be afraid of failure. I came here from the inner city. If not for Gayle, I wouldn't have known anything about the National Park Service. Now I've been here 20 years."

Hazelwood credits her willingness to listen as another key to her rise. "There's a difference between listening to somebody and really hearing them," she says. She also emphasizes the importance of being authentic. "Some people feel like they have to act differently if they're with the CEO," she observes. "I'm a fun-loving person, and I'm the same way with everybody."

In addition, she advises, look for mentors in unusual places. "People think mentors need to be at the top of an organization," she says, "but some of my best mentors were actually my subordinates. A lot of what we need to know can come from a maintenance worker, a secretary or a person who has worked at the information desk for years and has listened to every visitor's questions."

Hazelwood says one of the smartest things she ever did in her career was to be flexible and open to moving somewhere else: "Far too often people say, 'I don't want to go there,' and have these preconceived notions of what it will be like. I always tell people you can do anything or go anywhere for a short time; it doesn't mean you have to spend the rest of your life there. But the experience can be invaluable to your career."

Happy Trails

Hazelwood says that asking her to recommend national parks for ESSENCE readers to visit is like asking a mother to choose which of her children are her favorites. But, with a sigh, she offered up these:

Yellowstone, Yosemite and Grand Canyon National Parks in Montana, California, Arizona "Rather than isolating one park, do a western swing and see the natural formations, the scenery and the big, beautiful animals. The experience is life-altering."

The Outer Banks, Shackleford Banks and Fort Pulaski in North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida "Plan a coastal trip to learn the history of the Civil War, see the beauty of the Atlantic Ocean, enjoy the birds and the turtles, and take in the incredible sunsets."

Cuyahoga Valley National Park in Ohio "Enjoy hiking trails, waterfalls and spectacular fall colors. You can also try canoeing, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing—seasonal activities you can learn in your own backyard." **To find a park near you, log on to nps.gov.**

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