



Prospective Ridger Guide

2026



2026 Conference:
July 19-23
Unicoi State Park
Helen, Georgia

Welcome!

Dear Community Service Leader,

The Blue Ridge Institute (BRI) is a longstanding organization of thoughtful nonprofit leaders, and we are excited you have shown interest in joining us. We think we have a good thing going here and hope you can find this experience as supportive and rewarding as so many have in our almost 100-year history.

Having been a member of BRI for many years, I understand that nonprofit leaders must unplug and refresh with a supportive group of colleagues. After my first BRI conference, I left feeling refreshed and ready to take on the challenges I faced at my small non-profit in Burlington, NC. What I didn't realize at the time was that I had begun friendships with some remarkable people that last to this day. And there is nothing more exciting than the first day of each conference when we can reunite and make more memories together.

Since 1927, unique traditions have emerged within BRI. We honor ours, consider them sacred – and sometimes quirky. The following pages provide a glimpse of who we are, what we do, and how you might benefit from becoming a “Ridger”. I encourage you to learn more about us by visiting www.blueridgelearns.org, and I welcome your interest in becoming a fellow Ridger.

Feel free to contact me directly at info@blueridgeleaders.org or by phone at 336-269-9577. I'm happy to answer any questions you might have.

Thank you!



Allison Gant
Executive Director

The BRI Experience

First and foremost, we *are a community*. Some of us lovingly refer to the Ridger community as our 'family of choice.' We are intergenerational-retirees and veteran leaders share their experience and wisdom with those new to leadership, our children and grandchildren share in the experience through the Youth Leadership Academy (more later!) to highlight a few examples.

We offer year-round opportunities to learn and renew, so that you become the leader you aspire to be. Our signature offering is an annual conference held near the end of July. For most new Ridgers, this is their first experience with the Institute. Beyond this conference there are multiple opportunities to learn with each other, and to renew throughout the year.

These opportunities take the form of:

Virtual Gatherings

- Roundtables
- Coffee chats
- Happy hours
- Book clubs
- Year-round professional development
- Health and wellness opportunities

"BRI helps me be a better leader and a better person. I am thankful every day for BRI."

– Richard LaPratt

Regional Gatherings

We host in-person events periodically in areas where a large number of Ridgers live and work.

Private Facebook Forum

BRI has a very active private Facebook Forum, where Ridgers continue conversations, share successes, as well as ask for and offer advice.



Annual Conference

Every July, without fail we gather to learn and renew in a relaxing environment. This is not your overly corporate conference.

Learn

We feature internationally acclaimed speakers like **Joan Garry, Vu Le, Dan Pallotta, Dr. Kim Hires, and Sister Simone Campbell** to name but a few.

Not only do we learn from these luminaries, they also mix and mingle with us, allowing for the kind of access and interaction you won't find at other conferences.

Renew

However you prefer to recharge, it's likely that we've made time and space for it. You have ample options to engage with others, be it self-directing your own experience taking advantage of the many options the park provides. Or opt into something we've organized, be it for exercise, reflection, play, or all of the above.



"If I designed a retreat for nonprofit leaders, it would look a lot like BRI."

—Vu Le

Friends & Family

We welcome your friends and family! In fact, friends and family are a big part of the Ridger community. There are numerous opportunities for Ridger guests to take part in all aspects of the conference experience—from learning sessions, rejuvenation activities, the President's Ball—you name it, kids and other guests are welcome to participate (except for the President's Ball, of course, that's for adults only 😊).



Youth Leadership Academy

For future leaders ages 4-14, we offer the Youth Leadership Academy, which we cleverly refer to as YLA.

Under expert guidance, former YLA participants plan and implement a dynamic program that sets the foundation for youth leadership with a fun-filled atmosphere.

AND, while the adults are attending the President's Ball, YLA counselors have a fun event planned for the youngsters.





Join Us

Thank you for spending a bit of time to learn more about BRI and the Ridger community. If you're interested in joining us, and if you hold an executive-level position in a community service organization, report directly to the CEO or Executive Director, or if you are retired from such roles, connect with the person who nominated you and hear their story. BRI also welcomes individuals from governmental and higher education institutions. You can also explore our website, and join our public Facebook community for service leaders. Likewise, you can follow us on LinkedIn.

You are doing incredibly difficult work, and the demand for strong, resilient leadership in the community services sector continues to increase. BRI offers support, learning opportunities, and life-long friendships. I sincerely hope you will consider applying.

The process is simple. When you visit our website, click 'Join BRI' under the 'Membership' tab.

Finally, please **contact us at info@blueridgeleaders.org or 336-269-9577** if you'd like to know more or discuss any aspect of BRI and the Ridger experience.