**Elks Scholar Service Trips: All Aboard**

For nearly 100 years, the sound of a train whistle and the consistent thrum of wheels on steel signaled the approach of goods and people in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Hosting a large rail center that connected the Midwest to the southern United States, the mountain town was essential to supporting industrial growth through the transportation of materials and aiding the war effort during World War II by moving troops and supplies.

Though the last passenger train left Chattanooga in 1970, the historical significance of the Choo-Choo is still evident, as is the town’s ability to bring people together.

In early January, 18 Elks scholars gathered in Chattanooga for the 2025 Winter Elks Scholar Service Trip. Though they arrived by planes and cars, the scholars were guided by the Chattanooga Choo Choo. The sign, sitting atop a tall building downtown, served as a landmark to guide the scholars back to their hostel at the end of the day.

“I’m from a really small town,” says Chandler Plante, a 2023 Most Valuable Student scholar sponsored by Sedona, Ariz., Lodge No. 2291. “It’s not often you see a bunch of college students out here working to serve a community none of them are from.”

Regardless of the track their life has traveled, Elks scholars all have one thing in common: a love for service. Led by Program Relations Associate Libby Willkomm, the scholars spent their first night in Chattanooga learning about the other things they had in common—and eating pizza.

On the first full day of the trip, the scholars headed to the CHATT Foundation, a local organization that seeks to meet the needs of the people experiencing hunger and homelessness. At the CHATT Foundation, scholars reorganized donations, cleaned, sorted toiletry items, and helped in the thrift store. When completing service, the scholars don’t always interact directly with program recipients; instead, they help by accomplishing tasks essential to helping the organization operate.

“Seeing just how much manpower it takes to get these organizations running means a lot,” said Jed Quiaoit, a 2021 Most Valuable Student scholar sponsored by Vista, Calif., Lodge No. 1968 and member of the Elks Scholar Advisory Board. “It’s the little things that make a big difference, like cleaning and sorting donations.”

Employees at the organizations where the scholars served commented on how helpful and speedy the scholars were. At most service sites, the scholars finished their assigned tasks so quickly they could do more than what the organizers initially planned. How do they complete their tasks so fast? Teamwork.

On Elks Scholar Service Trips, scholars bond quickly through their shared love of helping others and the activities that get them out of their comfort zones and encourage them to make friends. After the first day of service, the scholars completed an escape room together.

“With 30 seconds to spare, we managed to escape from the runaway train at the Chattanooga Escape Experience,” says Anika Raburn, a 2024 Most Valuable Student scholar, sponsored by Raleigh, N.C., Lodge No. 735. “Although we didn’t know each other 24 hours prior, we all shared the goal of escaping the runaway train, just as we shared the goal of giving back to the Chattanooga community. We quickly learned each other’s strengths and how to divide the tasks fairly and efficiently.”

This teamwork was on full display when the scholars went to the Chattanooga Area Food Bank and Habitat for Humanity Restore the next day. At the Food Bank, the scholars packed 375 emergency food boxes and labeled 4,020 cans of green beans. The food bank purchases unlabeled cans at a discount from the manufacturer, so they have volunteers put handmade labels on the cans to help cut costs.

In the afternoon, the scholars reorganized the inventory in Habitat for Humanity Restore’s thrift store to make it more desirable for customers. Proceeds from the thrift store go toward keeping the nonprofit operational.

“It might not be the cleanest job or the job that’s the most desirable,” says Chandler, “But it’s what makes a difference. Service is a lot better when you want to do it out of the kindness of your heart and you’re not expecting anything in return.”

For the final day in Chattanooga, the scholars started at the Chambliss Center for Children, which provides 24-hour childcare, transitional homes for teenagers aging out of foster care, and spaces for children to feel safe and cared for before they enter the foster care system. The Center serves more than 750 children every day, and the scholars helped by taking down the vast array of Christmas decorations, packing them into neatly labeled boxes, and storing them in the attic until next season.

No Elks Scholar Service Trip is complete without a little sightseeing. After completing their last service project, the scholars traveled to a lookout point of view over Chattanooga before heading down in a glass elevator to see the waterfall. Ruby Falls is the tallest underground cave waterfall open to the public in the United States.

Even though the waterfall was unique and impressive, many of the scholars’ favorite part of the trip came after.

“The Chattanooga Elks Lodge was really special to me,” says Shani Tursunova, a 2024 Most Valuable Student scholar sponsored by Florence, Ky., Lodge No. 314. “Putting a face behind the impact that [the Elks] have had on my education and my future is incredible to me.”

At the Lodge, the scholars were treated to a taco bar, a photo booth, and tunes spun by the Elks own DJ, The Bob. The scholars quickly took to the dance floor, where they showed off their line dancing skills and their ability to do the Cha-Cha Slide.

“That is exactly what the Elks is about,” says Shani. ‘It’s about having a family and giving back to communities that have a need. Being able to do that with your family is very special to the Elks.”

Though passenger trains no longer bring people to Chattanooga, the mountain town—and the Elks who call it home—are still experts at bringing people together.

*The Elks National Foundation offers three Elks Scholar Service Trips annually. These trips provide scholars the opportunity to learn about societal issues, serve those in need in the name of the Elks, and connect with their #ElksFamily from across the country. For more information about the trips, visit* ***enf.elks.org/ScholarServiceTrips***.