



There is no denying that poverty and hunger exist in Avery County, even debilitating levels of both. Often, however, unless you look closely, these issues are hidden behind the mountains and down in the hollows across the mountains of North Carolina.

Making A Difference Down The Roadways of Avery County



The High Country Charitable Foundation and Its Work in Avery County

By Jim Swinkola and Alison Azbell

What's more important — paying rent or buying groceries? What's more important — putting gas in the car to get to work or making a payment on your health insurance plan? What's more important — paying the electricity bill or buying school clothes for the kids?

For some of us, these are no-brainers.

"Easy. They're all necessary, so I will pay them all."

For many of us, the reality of prioritizing our expenses is a lot more challenging than that. Living paycheck-to-paycheck means we have to make tough decisions, because working 40, 50, 60 hours a week still doesn't make ends meet.

For many of us, living

in rural communities in the Appalachian Mountains means our jobs are not stable, our rent is more expensive, driving to and from work costs more, public transportation is not available and we don't have access to buying the things we need at affordable prices.

Add to that the fact that we're living in the wake of a suffering economy and working in industries that depend on tourism, and the hypothetical questions about what matters most take a backseat to harsh reality. We're working hard for our families, but expenses continue piling up until what was once black and white on paper fades into a veritable sea of gray area.

In Avery County alone, nearly 20 percent of approximately 17,700 residents live below the poverty line. More than 700 local families lie



"We realized that there was a lot of need, and we knew that we wanted to give back to the community and help with some of those needs. And I was soon surrounded by like-minded Elk River residents with the courage to start the *High Country Charitable Foundation*."

Foundation Founder and Chairman
Jim Ward



Part of the High Country Charitable winning team (from left to right): Malcolm Sina, Sharon Sina, Del Williamson, Barbara Smith, Stan Kirschner, Sandy Moss and Jim Ward.



Food trucks are all the rage in the restaurant and dining world these days, and HCCF Chairman Jim Ward found a way to bring that fun outdoor food environment to Elk River Club in a way that could help the foundation, too. Ward covers expenses for the weekly food truck visit at the stables at Elk River's Saddle Club, which sits on 40 acres of fenced pasture and paddock at the heart of the club's community. Club members join him Monday evenings each week to grab a bite to eat and learn more about the High Country Charitable Foundation, often making financial contributions to the organization while they're there.

HCCF Board Members

| | |
|------------------|--------------------|
| Florio Abbate | Phil Myers |
| Barry Blake | Sandra Moss |
| John Brabson | Barbara Smith |
| Sherry Cooke | John C.B. Smith |
| Jack Erdody | Janey Sterchi |
| Harold Fenner | David Wallace |
| James Ferguson | James J. Ward, III |
| Stan Kirschner | Delbert Williamson |
| Gayle McCalister | |

Core Values of HCCF

In addition to minimizing its own expenses, the High Country Charitable foundation has expressed the following as its three core values and primary objectives:

- 1. Community Involvement:** to raise funds, along with donating time and talent to meet the critical needs of our neighbors and animals in need.
- 2. Excellence:** to operate with integrity and transparency; to strive to generate the biggest impact for our community.
- 3. Value:** to provide value to our contributors by distributing every dollar we collect to local agencies serving the needy; to provide value to the communities by maximizing our financial and volunteer resources.

within 40-75 percent of the county's median income, which was less than \$40,000 per household and less than \$22,000 per capita according to the latest census reports, qualifying them to purchase a Habitat for Humanity home.

Of residents under the age of 65, 20 percent are without health insurance coverage.

Of the more than 2,200 students enrolled in Avery County Schools, more than 60 percent qualify to receive free or reduced lunches, and at least 200 of those have little to eat at home on days when school is not in session.

With stats like that, there's no denying that poverty and hunger exist in Avery County, even debilitating levels of both. Often, however, unless you look closely, these issues are hidden behind the mountains and down in the hollow.

Although not all challenges stemming from poverty can be solved with money, a growing number of members in Banner Elk's prestigious Elk River Club have seen many of these issues at work firsthand in the community and have decided to use their financial resources to "take the edge off" of these needs in the High Country.

"We realized that there was a lot of need, and we knew that we wanted to give back to the community and help with some of those needs. We are commanded by Scripture to feed the poor and help people in need," said Jim Ward, one such resident of Elk River Club. "As I talked to neighbors and friends in the community, the need to 'do something' grew and I prayed for a solution. My prayers were answered and I was soon surrounded by like-minded Elk River residents with the courage to start the High Country Charitable Foundation."

As the needs of the less fortunate have become more apparent to its membership, the HCCF continues its work to combat the issues impacting local families and invest in future generations of Avery County citizens.

The Foundation

The HCCF is a recent addition to the vast network of charitable foundations in the mountains of western North Carolina, which facilitate fundraising for charitable purposes and later determine how best to allocate the funding.

In many of these organizations, the HCCF included, board members often wear many hats as administrators, as well as high-level contributors who provide a large percentage of the funding themselves.



Jim Ward talks up the High Country Charitable Foundation during one of their weekly fundraiser events that brings in a foodtruck every week to the stable grounds at Elk River.



Home to one of North Carolina's top ten golf courses, Elk River Club is a private, pristine, member-owned equity club that's nestled along the Elk River in the mountain getaway town of Banner Elk. Many of its residents are second homeowners with strong philanthropic connections to their home cities, which often lead them on a natural path toward giving in the High Country just as they do in their own out-of-town or out-of-state communities.

"Elk River Club members over the years have shown a unique passion for charitable giving to help meet the needs of Avery County," said foundation supporter George Koehn. "We had long talked about establishing our own foundation, directly overseen and administered by Elk River Club members to ensure maximum benefit is provided to chosen agencies and chari-



Foundation Founder and Chairman
Jim Ward

Avery High Key Club Enhanced Leadership Skills

In the heart of Avery County, adolescents are joining hands to make the community a better place. A charter organization of the Kiwanis Club of Banner Elk, the Key Club numbers several dozen bright, active, high-achieving members. Some of the core goals of Key Club are leadership and service. Thousands of Key Club volunteer hours are spread across the county every year, supporting a wide variety of charitable projects and causes.

Each Key Club meeting opens with a pledge: "I pledge to build my home, my school and community; to serve my nation and God; and to combat all forces which tend to undermine these institutions."

Over the last three years, female students have been elected to lead the club, and this elite group of leadership has fondly become known as "the gaggle of girls."

Several community leaders recognize the excellence of this club. Avery County Schools Superintendent Dr. David Burleson said, "Our Key Club has been outstanding in their dedication to community and their performance of service activities."

Avery County Sheriff Kevin Frye agreed.

"The Key Club is an exemplary organization with outstanding young men and women who go above and beyond to make our county better," he said. "They show leadership and become role models to other young men and women, often taking the lead or being the driving force to make something happen in Avery County which otherwise would not be accomplished."

For the last two years, the Avery High Key Club has been recognized as a Distinguished Diamond Club. The Carolinas District averages 250 Key Clubs in North and South Carolina, and only two clubs in the district received the coveted Distinguished Diamond recognition in 2016. Only 62 out of more than 5,000 clubs worldwide have received this award.

Whether volunteer or paid, charitable causes need strong leadership, and the HCCF believes that the more skilled the leadership, the more likely a charitable cause will achieve its objectives. Therefore, grants of \$5,000 in both 2015 and 2016 were awarded to enhance leadership skills of members of the Key Club. A new focus in 2016 will teach how to use a "moral compass" when making leadership decisions.

Visit keyclub.org or kiwanis.org to learn more about the overarching international organizations and contact the high school at 828-733-0151 for information on this chapter.

"The Key Club is an exemplary organization with outstanding young men and women who go above and beyond to make our county better. They show leadership and become role models to other young men and women, often taking the lead or being the driving force to make something happen in Avery County which otherwise would not be accomplished."

Avery County Sheriff Kevin Frye



Maddi Daniels, President of the Avery High Key Club, addresses the Kiwanis Club of Banner Elk



HCCF chairman Jim Ward stands with Avery High Key Club President Maddi Daniels.



Ellie Kitchin of the Avery High Key Club. Within the Carolinas District of Key Club she holds the office of Lieutenant Governor of Division 2.



HCCF board member Sandy Moss presented a grant check to John Cox of Feeding Avery Families.

ties. The idea was doggedly pursued by Jim Ward, Hal Fenner and many others, and the foundation became a reality last year."

Following its inception, the group pursued and achieved non-profit status in order to accept tax-exempt donations. Members were soon able to create a mission and vision for the HCCF: to provide for needy Avery County residents and animals by supporting local public charities and other private foundations.

"When Jim Ward brought the idea of starting a charity to bring help to our county, it was jumped on by all those who heard about it. Quickly, a board was formed and plans were put in place to raise money to assist our neighbors in unfortunate situations," said Phil Myers, who moved to Elk River Club with his wife in 1999. "Prior to forming the HCCF, many of our members contributed to fundraising efforts or solicitations by friends in and out of our club. Our membership was ripe for an organized effort to help those in need in Avery County, and Jim's idea flourished immediately.

"Many of the members are retired and were successful in their working lives, and who have been leaders in their communities from all over the United States. As such, they now have concern and love for their community at their new summer home location in the mountains. We feel good about helping others, as it is better to give than to receive. Sometimes, we just need a push from the



A team of volunteers packs boxes of food inside the Feeding Avery Families center in Newland. An estimated 600 boxes of free food items are distributed monthly to the hungry of Avery County.

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Maralana



Joe and David



Krystal

Yellow Mountain Enterprises

This long-time Avery agency is a day vocational program that serves adults with developmental disabilities, providing work scaled to the unique abilities of each person. Social and recreational activities, which can be difficult for persons who cannot drive and live on small fixed incomes, also are provided.

Its enterprises include:

- Trophies and Tees: creates custom designed trophies, plaques and T-shirts using a laser engraver
- Yellow Mountain Treasure Box: a bargain thrift store in downtown Newland that offers quality items at reasonable costs
- Yellow Mountain Christmas Bows: used to decorate a Christmas tree, wreath or wrapped present for that special person
- Yellow Mountain Mail Processing: will put together mass mailing projects at a minimal cost
- Yellow Mountain Crafts: creates an assortment of items and is known for its Tin Man
- Yellow Mountain Yard Service: can maintain yards by mowing, raking and trimming

Yellow Mountain Enterprises operates under the umbrella of Avery Association for Exceptional Citizens and a nonprofit organization. AAEC also operates the Avery County Group Home, an adult supervised living facility.

If Yellow Mountain did not exist for her, Krystal says, "I'd be at home playing video games." Charlie said, "I would be home in bed" and Flo admitted, "I would be watching TV."

The High Country Charitable Foundation provided a matching grant that allowed Yellow Mountain to replace an old van, which has racked up 250,000 miles of drive time, with a new model.

Contact Yellow Mountain Enterprises by phone at 828-733-2944, by email at ymetrophies@ymail.com or by mail at P.O. Box 548, Newland, North Carolina 28657. Visit yellowmountainenterprises.org to learn more.



YME director David Tate (with hat) and Charlie

Photos by Jim Swinkola



Flora



Mace



Laken



Moving one of the 600 boxes of food distributed in September during the Feeding Avery Families "give away day" is volunteer Bobby Duke.

right person or from the right direction to get the ball rolling."

The Rev. Tee Gatewood of Arbor Dale Presbyterian Church sees a number of the foundation's members in his congregation and sees their work firsthand.

"People who are grateful for God's grace become generous. They give their time and the trust. They give their fun and their funds, and the neighbors are blessed," Gatewood said. "One of the unique ways that is happening in our midst is the High Country Charitable Foundation."

From day one, board members have made it a priority to underwrite any expenses necessary to the foundation's work, ensuring that every penny possible goes to people in need.

"All expenses are covered by board members, because people want to see that money is given back," Ward explained. "Other organizations might raise a million dollars, but have to spend a large amount of money to do so. All of our costs are covered so everything goes right back into our chosen charities."

As the new foundation began to take shape, members began a comprehensive process to better understand surrounding communities and to see firsthand what issues are plaguing the people of Avery County. Additionally, they began to study, interview and vet local agencies and organizations to determine where their financial contributions might be most effective and how to maximize their impact.

Their studies quickly led them to realize that, in addition to food and housing for children and families, opportunities in training, education and activities were



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Funding for the HCCF grants came from dinner dance fundraisers held at the stunning Elk River Clubhouse and yielded an impressive \$155,000 in one night. Board members auctioned off personal items, such as a week's stay in their own homes or trips on their private planes, and served as wait staff during the festivities.

needed for special populations, which included developmentally disabled children and adults and abused women and children.

Members also learned of pressing needs in the area of improving lives for local animals and controlling their populations, quickly seeing that their funding could make a great impact at the Avery County Humane Society, which reports that 579 cats and dogs have been vaccinated,

tested for illnesses, provided necessary treatment and adopted so far in 2016. The humane society's low-cost spay and neuter program has also helped more than 600 pets so far this year.

To address specific issues and needs, they developed relationships with local leaders and various agencies, relying heavily on these new community partners to help make a difference in the best ways possible.

"The whole idea is to build charity," said Ward. "We can't cover the world, so we chose Avery County, because it's ours. We live here and we should take care of it."

Grant Funding

In preparation for distributing its first cycle of grant funding, the budding High Country Charitable Foundation began its fundraising process with a better understanding of the challenges that many local families face throughout the year.

In addition to board member contributions, the group's inaugural Dinner Dance was held at the stunning Elk River Clubhouse and yielded an impressive \$155,000 in one night. Board members auctioned off personal items, such as a week's stay in



their own homes or trips on their private planes, and served as wait staff during the festivities.

The Dinner Dance, now the foundation's primary annual fundraising event, brings in nearly 70 percent of the total it distributes to the community.

Six organizations requested grants in the first application process, which brought to the foundation's attention an array of services and programs that are known for

their good works in the community. Nonprofits and charities were selected to receive funding based on their reputations and on their abilities to achieve objectives in meeting the needs of the people and animals of Avery County.

Among its first round of grant recipients were the Grandfather Home for Children, which boasts more than 100 years of history in serving local children, as well as the May Wildlife Rehabilitation Center at Lees-McRae, the only learning laboratory and wildlife rehab program of its kind in the country.

Other recipients included Habitat for Humanity of Avery County, the Key Club of Avery High School, the Avery County Humane Society, Blue Ridge Partnership for Children, Casting Bread Food Pantry, Children's Hope Alliance, Feeding Avery Families, Hospitality House, Hunger and Health Coalition, Mediation and Restorative Justice Center, OASIS, Volunteer Avery County, WAMY Community Action and Yellow Mountain Enterprises.

"People who could come and go into and out of these mountains and could keep what is theirs are giving," said Gatewood. "They are sharing. They are providing much needed funds for people with many needs. It has been fun to watch that at Arbor Dale."

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Feeding Avery Families

The foundation is also a strong advocate in hunger relief and supports the work of Feeding Avery Families. This all-volunteer Christian organization is located in Newland and provides some 600 boxes of food every month to the hungry people of Avery County. Staffed by 30-40 volunteers, boxes are packed with both canned and frozen foods and freely given to those in need.

“My four-year-old daughter would be so hungry that she would sit for hours crying and sucking her thumb,” shared Becca, a 28-year old mother of four. “Then we discovered Feeding Avery Families.”

Feeding Avery Families is dedicated to eliminating hunger by any means possible including monetary donations, food donations and community service.

Go online to Facebook.com/feedingavery for more information.

Allen Clark, vice president of the Christian ministry Feeding Avery Families, sees the foundation’s contributions at work every day. Having been raised in a family of five children during the last four years of the Great Depression, Clark said his eyes were reopened to the need for food ministry when a young man at his church in Bristol, Virginia got involved in volunteering for a local soup kitchen.

“When we moved to Banner Elk, after our children were educated and out in the world, we became involved with feeding the hungry in Avery County. We found that there are many, many hungry children who go to school each day without breakfast,” he said. “There are also families who just do not have the money to buy food. Some of these people are hungry because of the lack of work in the county. Others are hungry due to advanced age and health problems.”

“Feeding Avery Families was created to attempt to feed the people of Avery County who are in need of food on a continual basis. This service started by being able to give away 50 or 75 boxes of food each month. Today, we give between 550 and 600 boxes per month.”

Funding allocated by the HCCF allows Feeding Avery Families to reach even more people as the ministry, and the community’s need for it, grows.

“We have just found the right building



John Cox is the Director of Feeding Avery Families. He’s a “hand-on” volunteer as seen here moving a box of produce during the food distribution morning in Newland.

that would enhance our growth greatly,” said Clark. “With God’s help and the generosity of our dear friends, we can begin a new era in Feeding Avery Families.”

By supporting programs like the Key Club at Avery County High School, the foundation is making a solid investment in the next generation of leadership in the High Country.

“When I first joined Key Club, I was a shy, introverted student who wasn’t sure what I wanted to do in the world; but Key Club has helped me become someone who can speak in front of thousands of people without fear and knows exactly what path I want to go down,” said 16-year-old Ashlin. “Wish me luck as a future leader of Samaritan’s Purse!”

Still in its infancy, the foundation carried its work into another fiscal year during the summer of 2016, during which 25 charities applied for grants and the second annual Dinner Dance at Elk River Club raised another \$200,000 in August. This added funding, along with donations collected at the weekly food truck event on the Elk River stables, has permitted the board to support a number of additional causes in the High Country in its second grant cycle.

Each of the foundation’s 2015 grant recipients received additional monies in 2016, and new recipients have included

Avery County Special Olympics, the Crossnore School, Grandfather Mountain Stewardship Foundation, the Historic Banner Elk School, Mayland Community College, Parent to Parent Family Support Network, Reaching Avery Ministry, Williams YMCA of Avery County, The Hill Center and Western Youth Network.

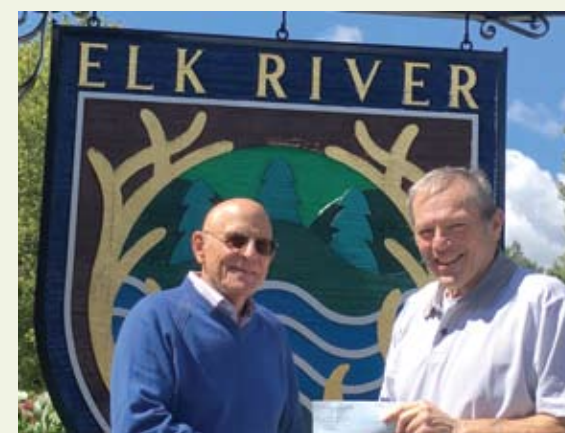
Looking Ahead

As the foundation builds on its new role in the High Country, its membership looks forward to serving more and more local people every year.

“Our community is and will be better off as we continue to raise funds for the support of the so many wonderful organizations already in place, but which must have financial support to continue their good works,” said Myers. “There is always more need than resource, but watch the High Country Charitable Foundation grow from here — and it will.”

The foundation’s goals for the future include continuing to meet immediate needs in Avery County, as well as to reserve funding for local emergencies.

This year, the HCCF was able to fund 20 of the 25 grant requests. In the future, members hope to inspire more second homeowners in the area to take a closer look at people in need and the agencies that serve them and find a way to make a difference.



Stan Kirschner (left) of the High Country Charitable Foundation presented a grant award to Jim Swinkola, appearing on behalf of the Kiwanis Club of Banner Elk Foundation and the Avery High Key Club. The award will support enhancing leadership skills for key club members.

“I would like to see other gated communities in Avery County get involved in the HCCF in order to meet even greater charitable needs in our community,” board member Hal Fenner said. “I have personally visited with each one of the charities requesting grants this year and I know the needs are greater than we could fund.”

As time presses on, they look forward to more contributions that will support the longevity of the organization.

“It’s hard to get this kind of group organized because it’s a major undertaking,” Ward said. “Simple things like getting stationery, making connections and all that other stuff; but, I think there are other communities who want to give back but just don’t know how. Luckily, we are now structured enough to know the mechanisms of how things work.”

“We want to make sure that, long after we are gone, there is still money going towards these organizations. Yes, we want to make a connection with other communities, but if we can make a difference on a local level, then we are doing our part.”

Agencies interested in applying for grants are encouraged to contact the foundation for more details. Grant applications for the 2017 cycle will soon be made available online at highcountryfoundation.org. ♦

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