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## It's My Job: Whitney Styles — Executive Secretary, High Country Charitable Foundation

Dec 28, 2024 04:58PM • By Rande Brown



Growing up in Avery County, Whitney Styles observed a different aspect of the highly affluent tourist destination that is the High Country. In contrast to the neighborhoods full of secondary summer homes, high-end shopping destinations, and ski resorts, there are many individuals who struggle with poverty.

With a passion for helping her community, Styles works as the Executive Secretary at the High Country Charitable Foundation. Her job involves accounting tasks like managing donations and tax receipts, as well as organizing an annual fundraising event. She also leads communications with various nonprofit organizations regarding grant distributions, supporting the Foundation's role as the funder of the work of many nonprofits in Avery County.

"We operate as a 501(c)(3) organization, but our goal is to help people by helping other nonprofits," Styles said. "The fire department is a nonprofit, the Humane Society is a nonprofit, and Habitat for Humanity is a nonprofit. If donors have a chunk of change they need to get rid of for tax purposes, they can gift that to us, and then we distribute that to where it is needed most."

As of December 2023, Styles had helped the Foundation distribute more than \$3 million in funds to more than 40 different area organizations. She also works to communicate the needs of less fortunate individuals to potential donors and members of the board.

"Many of our donors are country club members who never see the other side," Styles said. "I try to encourage people to drive to Newland or Elk Park so they can see what I see. Because we are such a tourist state and county, in Banner Elk specifically, many people have a certain perception of the county, but there's a totally different world that exists; a poverty that no one sees."

As an Avery County native, Styles personally knows some of the people who are in need; people that are directly impacted by the efforts of the Foundation. Stories from the community have changed her own perspective on life, which can be emotional for her as she shares these with donors at events and fundraisers.

Styles hears nonprofits share stories of older adults with barely enough income to pay their heating bills and who have to choose between groceries and medication, or of local school children asking for nothing but food on their Christmas wish lists. She often shares these stories with the donors who own multi-million dollar vacation homes located 10 minutes down the road from those who are not able to make ends meet.

The two-sided nature of engaging with the community highlights disparities in the area, which is both a challenge and an opportunity to help intertwine the two sides of the community. It is also a pleasure for her to be an advocate for the individuals who are struggling.

"It is very rewarding, but it is sometimes heartbreaking," Styles said. "We get about 40 to 45 grant applications per year, and we have a very thorough grant committee board that goes through each of these. Our goal is to fill the whole grant needs of each one, and we do the very best that we can, but it's not always enough."

Working toward the goal of supporting as many nonprofit grant applications as they can, Styles strives to spread the word about the Foundation to the community. She relocated their annual fundraiser from the Elk River clubhouse to a public location in an effort to get more community members involved. This summer, their fundraising gala and silent auction raised approximately \$375,000, which feels like an incredible reward for her efforts.

While it is the board who is responsible for distributing funds, Styles does share her community knowledge and connections with decision makers to inform them on current issues and needs. She also encourages them to talk to other community members to gain a well-rounded understanding before making decisions about distribution of funds.

"It's an honor to be a part of something that has such a positive impact on that side of our community," Styles said. "It's really a privilege to work with the Foundation in this way, and to help it to grow. We're definitely working to expand and make the charity grow. It's a lot of work, but the reward is so worth it. I want it to last forever, because the impact is literally untouchable."

*Whitney Styles is the Executive Secretary of the High Country Charitable Foundation. Learn more at [HighCountryFoundation.org](#).*

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