

## The America Challenge 2017 – EBGC

Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> August and after months of fundraising, preparation and long anticipation the day had come where we began our venture to Tennessee. It was a long day, waking up at 6am to meet our fellow campers who we would be spending the next three weeks with. Our flight departed from Heathrow and after eight hours we touched down in Chicago to catch our connecting flight. Before we knew it, we had arrived in Knoxville, slightly jetlagged, and we were greeted by Bruce Crabtree, the Director of Program Compliance of EBGA who would be our tour guide for the next few days; alongside Jeff Money, the Club Director. Being five hours behind UK time, we ended up having dinner about three times – a nice welcome to the States.



Our first part of the trip was to attend the All Staff Conference of Tennessee that we had been kindly invited to. This is a huge annual event where representatives of all Boys and Girls clubs of Tennessee gather and participate in workshops and get to know one another. My first thought was how enthusiastic and welcoming everyone seemed to be; there was such a positive and vibrant atmosphere that it became infectious. We attended different workshops that included lesson planning, social awareness and the dark web, all of which were informative and gave a different perspective on the roles we live as youth leaders. On the Sunday, the four of us delivered our own outdoor game workshop where we led a two-and-a-half-hour session comprised of many different group activities. Due to the extreme heat, we had to improvise using the shelter and take a lot more breaks than we planned for; however, everyone enjoyed it and the participants were eager to see what us foreigners had to offer. Overall, I'm thankful that we got invited as I certainly learnt a lot in those two days and met some inspiring workers who help to change the lives of many young people daily.



Later on, we went to a High School football game and this was another exciting experience. The vast amount of people there providing support to both teams was phenomenal; this was a key thing we noticed whilst being there as back at home only parents tend to go to watch their kids play sports. This seemed to be a community event



where everyone came out to watch and have a good evening which was a privilege to be a part of. The next day consisted of sightseeing and wild swimming. We visited the Kentucky border where the time zone changes, Scott County visitor centre and a national historic landmark where the home of war veteran Alvin Cullum York is situated; one of the most decorated US soldiers in history. We also got the opportunity to go wild swimming and met some local park rangers who were informing us of the local history.



Part 1 of the trip was now over and ahead of us was the conservation week. We left the hotel and headed for Walmart where we bought all our food for the following week for the hike. Breakfast, lunch and dinner for six people for a week certainly took up a lot of room in our bags! We arrived at Soak Ash Creek, a Federal-owned property where the maintenance crew of the Appalachian Trail live and completed a fitness test to

show we were capable of hiking. That night we had dinner with the crew, met our fellow conservancy workers Billy and Kevin and sat down to a game of Monopoly (which I obviously won). An early start saw us head for the mountains where we began our 11-mile hike into base camp; this would be home for the next eight days. Upon arrival, we had to set up camp and to do so we had to start by clearing the area from all the overgrown shrubbery so we could set up our tents to sleep. Other key features like the electric bear fence and tarp over the seating area were also added to the camp for our own safety – if you want some advice, don't touch the bear fence with no shoes on!



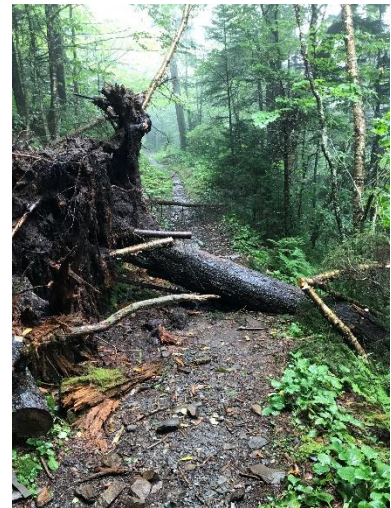
Each day then consisted of hiking six miles to and from the work site carrying our heavy backpacks along with our tools which included sledgehammers and pickaxes. On site, the conservation work began and it involved a lot of





strenuous, physical labour. Our first task was to collect as much rock as possible and create a rock pile which would eventually become a crushing station. The rock would have to be crushed using sledgehammers into golf ball sizes so that it could be used on the trail and made into a pathway. With people collecting and crushing rock, the other task was to collect tree-trunk sized logs and they had to be split using wedges and sledgehammer. These would be used to create water-bars - a log that elevates the trail and is placed at a 60-degree angle to allow water to drain away and reduce the rate of erosion. Over the space of the week, we managed to complete several projects along the stretch of trail we were repairing; this included creating several water bars (the best one we named Barry!), rock bars and drainage for the water to runoff.

During the week, we endured two consecutive days of relentless rain and these were the toughest days out the entire trip. We would go to sleep to the sound of rain, wake up in the rain, walk to the site in the rain, work in the rain, eat our soggy wraps in the rain... It was both physically and mentally draining. The toughest part was having to endure living in wet, damp clothes and drying off naturally without the luxury of a shower or towel. It would be fair to say that everyone struggled at some point throughout this period, I certainly did, however a bit of music in the cabin that evening managed to lift everyone's spirit and with the focus back on why we were really there, things started to look more promising. The next day came in the prevailing winds and being up on the ridge put us in a precarious position. Whilst on route to the work site, the decision was made to not go any further and remain at camp for the day for health and safety reasons – this was luckily the right decision as the next day we discovered a fallen tree where we would have been working. The final day sprung upon us and spirits were high as we had completed eight days of gruelling conservation work, meaning we could finally go back and have that long-awaited shower! For me personally, the time away from civilisation has helped to put life into perspective and I have learnt to not take as many things for granted. Common day-to-day scenarios such as drying with a towel, drinking fresh water and sleeping on a mattress are all taken for granted and this opportunity has helped to appreciate the smaller things in life; a valuable life lesson.





The next phase of the trip soon approached us – the 75-mile hike! Having been able to wash and dry most of our clothes at the conservancy camp, we unpacked our bags of any inessential items and loaded them with cooking stoves, minimal clothes and a lot of food; meaning my bag weighed in at an uncomfortable 35lbs. Having had an extra day of recovery down in Soak Ash due to unwarded bear activity in our first shelter, meant we had to hike out a day later. We therefore had to re-route the start of our hike and rather than starting at Davenport Gap on the Appalachian Trail, we started at Snake Den Ridge and hiked five miles at a steep incline to reach the AT. From there, it was another four miles to reach our first shelter where we got to appreciate the spectacular views along the way. When we arrived, it was rather cold so we changed into our warm clothes, took our heavy walking boots off and set up sleeping bags for the night on the wooden bunks. Around about six o'clock each night we would cook dinner using the stoves and it consisted of either rice or pasta; some days when we arrived early and were hungry dinner was on at four o'clock and in bed by five!



Day two of the hike started positively, even though we had a long 12 miles up ahead of us. It got to about midday and things took an unexpected turn for the worst. We were informed by the ATC conservancy and the ridge-runner that we would have to evacuate the mountain early



due to hurricane Irma and the potential threat it could cause. We were due to hike out on Tuesday having completed the 75 miles, however this was cut short by two days meaning in total we only got the opportunity to complete four of the seven days, which was a real shame. Sunday came around and it was time to leave the Smoky Mountains, having hiked a total of 88 miles in

the two weeks. We arrived at Clingmans Dome, the highest mountain peak in the Park which exceeds 6,600ft and is usually a tourist hotspot. The fact that nobody was here on a Sunday, not a single soul in sight had meant that the roads down below were closed. Our pick-up was therefore unable to reach us at the top of the mountain, but luckily a park ranger spotted us as was able to radio down to try and allow Jeff through the road-block to collect us.



Finally, we were out of the mountains and back down in civilisation, safe from the bears and hurricane. We stayed the night at Fort Craig Boys and Girls Club where we preceded to help out here for the next three days. We got the privilege to ride out on the infamous yellow school buses to collect the kids from school and before we knew it, we were swarmed and inundated with questions from the little ones. Who would have guessed, the first question I got was “Do you know the Queen?” and a funny one was “Are you from another universe...” Back at the club, we would help with activities such as indoor games, homework club and arts and crafts as well as set out the meals for the children, until about six o’clock when the kids would be collected by their parents. It then seemed to be tradition to go for dinner each night at a different fast food restaurant, I honestly lost count the number of different places we ate at. Chick-filet was by far the best food we had, however when it comes to deserts, the Cheesecake Factory swept everyone off their feet; so much so that it took me three days to eat the slab of cheesecake. Amongst all this, we also got the chance to be shown round the Boys and Girls Club Head Office where their facilities are absolutely incredible; including a gym and swimming pool.



Overall, it has been a once in a lifetime opportunity and I am very grateful for being given the chance to experience it with some amazing people. I met some characters along the way, both within the BGC organisation and also up in the mountains, and have made some friends for life. My thanks to Steve Hutson and Amiee-mae Egerton for organising the trip, and thanks to Linford Wanderers in particular Phil King for nominating me and giving me that opportunity.

