

## RONALD MCDONALD HOUSE: A STEADFAST TRADITION

By Annie Sung '22



Throughout the whirlwind of change this past school year brought, one of the LSP activities I missed the most when the pandemic shut down in-person volunteering opportunities was cooking meals for the residents at the Ronald McDonald House of Charlotte (RMH). Through a majority of my first two years in the Levine Scholars Program, I helped lead the meal planning and preparation for our nights of service at RMH and looked forward to the time that we spent in community each month. Something about cooking a meal for others has always brought me so much joy. For families staying at RMH, often the last thing that is on their mind is what they are going to eat, and being able to provide a warm meal for them was extra special.

Coming back into this new year and finally getting the green light to serve at RMH again, I knew that I wanted to continue to help lead the impact that we had been making and attempt to pick up where we left off. Being able to meet new scholars and develop deeper ties between Levine cohorts is something that volunteering at RMH readily allows. The teamwork and conversations that arise as we spin around the kitchen is just one example of how these

external volunteering opportunities are a foundational aspect in making the Levine Scholars Program such a tight knit community.

This year, while our cooking groups are much smaller and the food preparation and distribution look a little different, the impact we are making is still the same. This past month, we prepared a meal consisting of chicken and veggie pot pies, mashed potatoes, salad, and pumpkin cake. There were a handful of residents that showed up that night, and the rest of the food we packaged into individual containers for others to grab and eat throughout the week. While we were there, I had the opportunity to speak with one of the residents of Ronald McDonald House who had a child in the hospital. Hearing and empathizing with their story helped me reset my thinking from the busy week I had just finished and reminded me to slow down and appreciate the small aspects of life that can often be taken for granted like walking, talking, and cooking. The following Monday, I received an email from the Manager of RMH telling me that our pot pies were a hit and that there were residents inquiring about our recipe for them. The little joys that RMH has brought me are plentiful and it is clear that participating in these nights are popular among many Levine Scholars as the volunteering spots tend to fill up within the first 10 minutes of being opened.

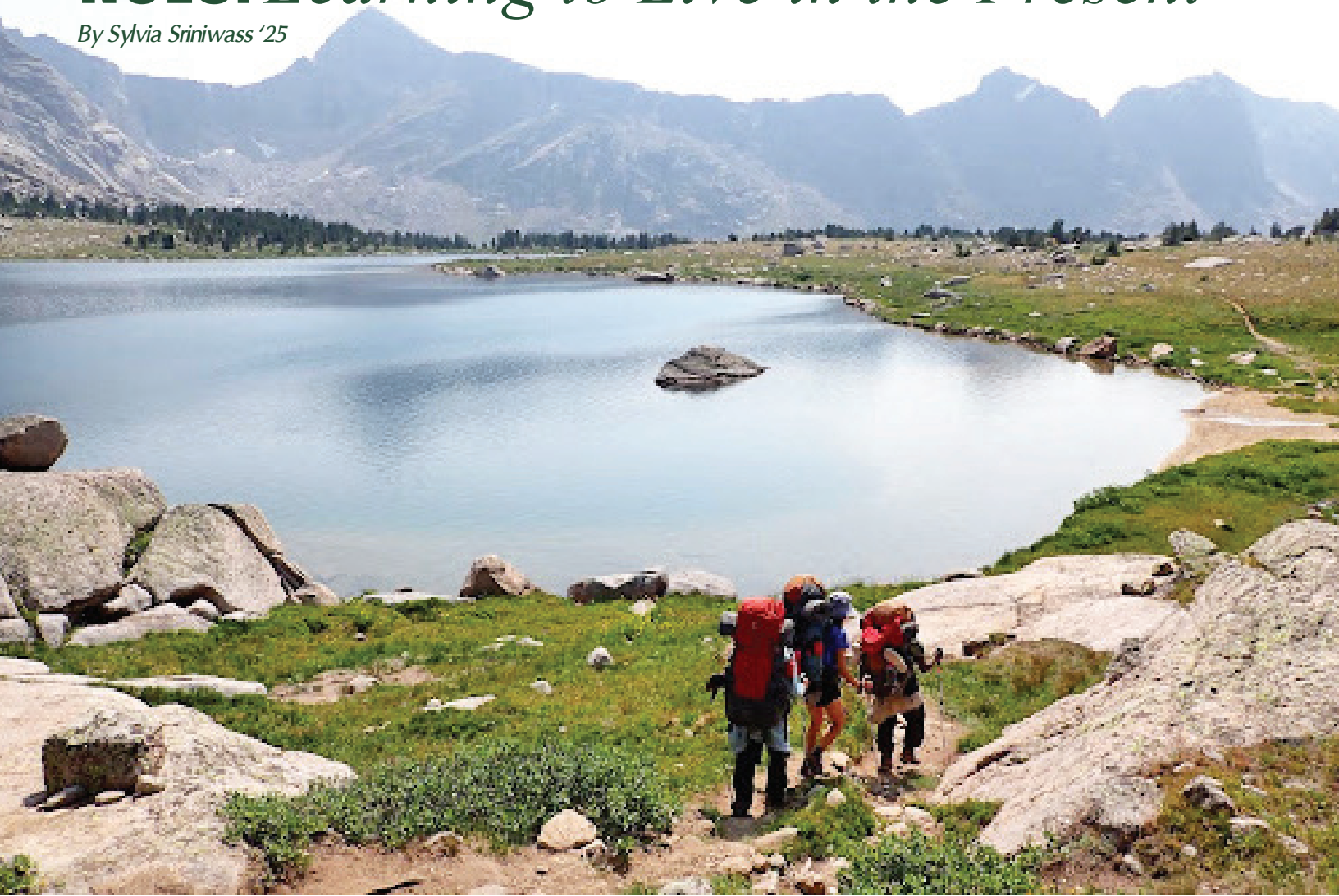
Finding creative, fun ways to give back to others is something I have always enjoyed and being able to do this through the Ronald McDonald House of Charlotte has been such a wonderful experience. I will forever be thankful for the laughs, insight, and growth that serving at RMH has provided me these past four years and am excited to see this LSP tradition continue for years to come.



(top) Levine scholars share some 49'er spirit before going to cook a delicious home-cooked meal at the Ronald McDonald House of Charlotte.  
(bottom) The Cook Crew dons their aprons, masks, and excitement before beginning their work in the kitchen.

# NOLS: *Learning to Live in the Present*

By Sylvia Srinivass '25



*Taking in the breathtaking views that are all around in the wilderness of Wyoming.*

On July 11th, the twenty scholars of the class of 2025 boarded the flights that would deliver us to Denver, Colorado. We were ecstatic to meet each other in person, a welcome comparison to the hours we had spent on Zoom calls together. Still half asleep from our early morning wake-up, none of us could have come close to imagining how transformative our time spent at NOLS would be, from the relationships we would form with each other, the goals we would surpass, the failures we would learn from, and the personal growth we would experience. We would leave NOLS 27 days later with a greater appreciation for life, a support system of twenty people, and enough mosquito bites for a lifetime.

Ration Period 1: Our first day in Lander was spent getting issued our individual and personal gear, learning how to have good hygiene in the backcountry (hint: it involves using your mouth like a faucet), and being told that three pairs of underwear were more than enough to last us the nearly four weeks we would spend in the wilderness. Unconvinced, we all snuck another pair into our Ziploc bags of clothes. The next day was our first hike. It was a whopping  $\frac{1}{4}$  of a mile long, and we struggled every step of the way. Most of us had never carried a 50-pound backpack before, nor had we faced a scourge of mosquitos as vicious as the ones found in the

Wind River Range. We learned how to cook on Whisperlite stoves, use bear spray, and had a very visual demonstration of the Seven Ds of Defecation. We approached the second day with sore hips and enthusiasm, which was heightened when we stumbled across a mother and daughter moose prancing around a field. Life in the backcountry took some getting used to. On day 6, my first day as Designated Leader, I was still new to map reading. I failed to study our route well enough before leaving and ended up leading my group in slightly the wrong direction for half an hour, at which point our instructor, Patty, stepped in to help me get us on track. I learned two vital lessons that day: there is no such thing as checking the map too much, and it's important to ask for the opinions of your peers when something feels wrong.

Ration Period 2: Having spent eight days in the field, we were all settling into our routines and learning how to make backcountry living as comfortable as possible. During this ration period, we had the exciting opportunity to summit Chimney Rock and Wind River Peak. We awoke at 5 am to have plenty of time to summit both peaks. The climb was difficult; the sun bore down on our backs and our thighs burned from the steep incline, but when we got to the top of Chimney Rock and later Wind River Peak, the views and the sense of accomplishment were well worth it. We had each





*The NOLS group begins their ascent up and over a pass into the Stough Creek Basin- the first of many passes on the course.*



*Mountain Passes, Boulder Fields, Lakes- oh my! There is always something to see at NOLS.*



*We Made It! LCLE-1 conquers Wind River Peak- the highest point in the southern Wind River Range, standing at 13,197'.*



*LCLE-1 stops to take a group photo in front of a rare marker in the wilderness, indicating they are at a divide between the Shoshone and Bridger-Teton National Forest.*

received a fresh apple during the re-ration, a gift so precious that we felt it should be savored during a special moment, like at the top of a mountain. We crunched on our apples as we admired the landscape, feeling immense appreciation for the joy that a simple piece of fruit could bring us. We returned to camp energized and ready to tackle whatever barriers, environmental or otherwise, awaited us during the rest of the trip. Our days were full of hiking, cooking, lake laundry with a view, first-aid classes, and intense card games, and before we knew it, the second week was over.

Ration Period 3: By this point in the trip we had become comfortable reading maps, orienting ourselves, and triangulating landmarks to pinpoint our location. We were also close to wrapping up our first-aid curriculum, a prerequisite for Independent Student Group Expeditions, or ISGE. One morning, we were all startled awake by a bolt of lightning that had struck our campsite. It was pouring rain and dangerous to go outside, so we learned to adapt - we made breakfast under our rain flies and shortened the day's hike. The time for us to part ways with our instructors finally came, and through teary eyes and temporary goodbyes, we promised to meet them at Blueberry Lake in three days. Our group of twelve split into three: one instructor group and two student groups. ISGE was an incredible experience. We had no instructors to guide us, only

our newly acquired survival and directional skills on which to rely. Our first day went smoothly, although our camp felt strangely empty with just the five of us. Our second day, however, was quite literally very bumpy: elevation gain, deadfall, and miles of off-trail hiking. Our compass led us astray (or maybe it was our fault, who's to say), so it took us nearly four hours to traverse one and a half miles of off-trail terrain. We felt so accomplished when we finally reached our X and fell into our usual evening routine of setting up tents and cooking dinner. Our last day in the backcountry was one of my favorites because although we didn't hike, we spent it together, filming our Dolly Parton-inspired 9 to 5 music video, playing Phase 10, and counting shooting stars.

In the front country, there are so many distractions - technology, social media, a perpetually busy schedule - and it's common to find myself fixating on the future rather than living in the present. In the backcountry, however, being present is the best and only option. We take in everything that happens as it happens, learn to see the big picture but to focus on one day at a time, and feel gratitude for the small things, like a hot drink on a cold night. NOLS made me realize how simple and amazing life can be if we chose to live it as it was intended to be experienced, with an abundance of forgiveness and gratitude, both for ourselves and for others.



# WORKSHOPPING THE WORLD'S PROBLEMS: MODEL UNITED NATIONS AT UNC CHARLOTTE

By Galen Miller '24

It was completely by accident that, when I accepted the Levine Scholarship and committed to attending UNC Charlotte, I would join a university with one of the most well-known and successful Model United Nations (MUN) clubs and competition teams in the state of North Carolina (and the entire country, actually). Charlotte MUN is the school's most successful non-athletic competition team, enjoying a reputation of excellence as far abroad as Spain, Canada, and Peru.

Competing in college MUN is a far cry from the high school version. I completed four years of high school conferences, serving as president of Watauga High School MUN for two years. I felt experienced and ready for a new caliber of competition, but it's hard to prepare for the intensity of college conferences. Since joining the team second semester of my first year, I've competed in virtual conferences hosted by Emory University and Southeast Regional MUN; traveled to Atlanta and Washington D.C. for the nation's oldest and largest college conference, NMUN; and chaired the UN World Tourism Organization for Charlotte's own Carolinas Conference. There's genuinely nothing quite like it.

The conferences call for negotiating skills, effective public speaking, in-depth and technical research, and the ability to write confusing working papers with a lot of people very fast. It's a lot of work—both before and during the conferences—but it pays off. Not only are you building key skills for just about any field or profession and adding impressive sections to your resume, but you're doing so all by traveling across the country with friends, spending time in cool

cities, and meeting and networking with thousands of other college students (and they give you cool name tags).

The highlight of my MUN experience so far was competing at the National Model UN Conference (NMUN) in Washington, D.C. early in November. It was a tough assignment: Panama in the High-Level Political Forum for the Sustainable Development Goals. The first few sessions of the weekend are usually rough—early working papers collapse or break up, people get frustrated, or the room is too hot. After a nasty first day (the cool keynote speakers notwithstanding), NMUN shaped up startlingly quickly, and with the help of key delegates from Nicaragua, Botswana, and Kenya; and some very dedicated writers, a solid working paper prioritizing the needs of developing countries and proposing concrete policies for emerging from Covid-19 with sustainable solutions took shape. It demonstrated MUN's profound ability to bring together people with common interests, vastly different views on those interests, and make them sit down and work together.

That's the key reason why I'll always keep coming back to Model UN—you are handed the opportunity to research a topic (very relevant to current events) you probably never would have otherwise, attack some of the world's biggest challenges from viewpoints you'd probably never think of (like attacking development issues as Panama, for example), and meet people you otherwise never would have. It's not just the content, either—NMUN and SRMUN Atlanta demonstrated the reach of UNC Charlotte MUN. Joining Charlotte MUN brings you into a wide-ranging and interconnected community stretching from New York City to San Francisco, and makes you part of something much larger than yourself. If you aren't sold yet, I'll leave you with this: MUN is just a really neat thing to do. I'm more than lucky that the Levine Scholars Program and this particular MUN team just so happened to be at the same university, and I know it will continue to be a foundational aspect of my Charlotte experience.

*Galen Miller '24 (Far Left) brainstorms with delegates representing St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Botswana, and Kenya on the Global South working paper nicknamed "Ruby."*

*Student's all gather around to problem solve and work together, negotiating changes to the "Ruby" working paper with the Global South working group. UNC Charlotte Delegates and UNCC alumni SRMUN Atlanta staff gather and celebrate together after the closing ceremonies of the conference.*

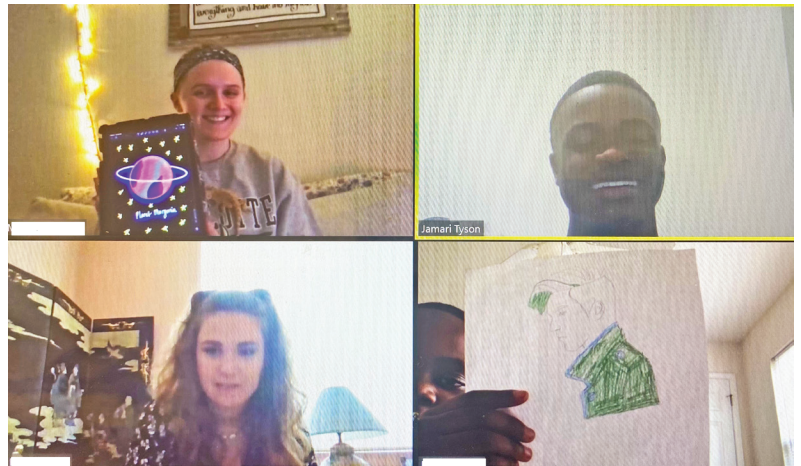




# MENTORING THE FUTURE

By Jamari Tyson '24

When I think of who I am today, I can't help but remember all the people who guided me along my path. I remember my 5th grade English teacher whose dedication to helping me remember my verbs, nouns, and adjectives was admirable. I reminisce about the upperclassmen in my high school who were always willing to impart words of wisdom or guidance. I most certainly recall the college age summer camp counselors who made it a joy to wake up early in the morning on a summer day. Finally, I can't forget about the people I call family, whether related by blood or not, who pushed me every day to live up to my full potential. Sincerely, I would not be in the position I am today without the people who supported me every step of the way. My memories are why I joined College Mentors for Kids at UNC-Charlotte, and they are what inspire me to dedicate my time to the program.



*Jamari and fellow CMFK mentor excitedly engage with their little buddies as the buddies show off their personal art masterpieces.*

Kira Chiles, a member of the Class of 2023, explained the mission and importance of the club to me during an afternoon in my freshman year. She expressed to me the profound impact the mentors have on the lives of the kids who we refer affectionately to as 'little buddies'. College Mentors for Kids is a national organization with many chapters spread across the nation. We serve thousands of little buddies with the core belief that mentoring transforms lives; recalling my own experiences, I definitely believe that this statement is true. Every week, we have UNC-Charlotte students meet and mentor little buddies who are elementary school students. At this stage in their lives, they are beginning to dream about what they want to do in the future and where they envision themselves. Our goal, encourage their dreams and give them time and support to make sure they have the tools they need to succeed.

Every week, mentors and little buddies meet and complete activities that our chapter's activities committee meticulously planned. One of my favorite activities was virtually exploring the art of renaissance painters in ancient chapels and buildings. The purpose of this activity was to allow our little buddies to learn history and be inquisitive about different expressions of art. It was absolutely heartwarming to see their amazed expressions as we searched for hidden items in the paintings, such as a human heart and liver. Afterwards, our little buddies got to let their creativity flow and draw their own masterpieces. Not to worry though, the mentors got a piece of the action too and drew their own artwork. A huge misunderstanding is that the relationships formed are one-sided and only the little buddy's lives are transformed; however, the one-sided mindset is far from the truth.



*Jamari (Front Center), along with other CMFK Chapter Members, enjoy a Mentor building event at Scareowinds, an annual Spooky Themed display at a local amusement park (Carowinds).*

Indeed, the relationships formed in College Mentors for Kids are beneficial for both parties. While mentors assume a responsible role, they more than often than not learn something from the little buddies. For instance, I witnessed one mentor develop an understanding that helping children emotionally and mentally is what she wanted to do in the future. In another instance, a mentor realized that he truly enjoyed storytelling and entertaining others, so he decided to double down on his interest in journalism. Personally, I loved being able to observe those transformative moments, and that is why I decided to apply for a position on the program's executive board.

Undoubtedly, running a program with over 50 mentors and an equal amount of little buddies is a lot of work. However, my position as the Vice President of Engagement has been extremely rewarding. My role is to make sure that everyone in the program feels connected and supported throughout the year, while also making sure recruiting and match closure runs smoothly. My leadership role has both tested my organizational skills and enhanced my resolve for the program. Without a doubt, mentoring transforms lives, and I look forward to the memories I will continue to make as a part of College Mentors for Kids at UNC-Charlotte.



# RESEARCH: A KEYSTONE FOR CHANGE

*By Amogh Bandekar '23*

“Research?” I questioned to my 8 year old self, I was sure I didn’t want to do that. In elementary school, when my science teacher first told us about the research we would have to do for our science projects, I immediately thought “how would this really help anyone?”. While I continued to progress through from elementary school to high school, my ideas on research remained stagnant. It wasn’t until a Levine scholar alumnus, Vrushab Gowda, nudged me to get involved in research that I decided to give research another shot.

Being a Biology and Economics major, I was fascinated by two general questions: how can we innovate new biological methods to stop cancers from spreading in the body? And how can we improve our social systems to prevent the need for medical treatments? To explore this first question, I initially became involved in Dr. Shan Yan’s Cancer Biology Lab my freshman year. Research in Dr. Yan’s lab was incredibly fascinating as we worked to identify the role of novel proteins in regulating the replication of cancer cells and DNA expression with the goal of being able to translate these discoveries into cell therapies. What initially seemed like abstract and complex biological concepts became tangible and real processes as I worked on a variety of biological experiments in the lab. While in Dr. Yan’s lab I learned a variety of lessons regarding research, specifically his work showed me that research requires resiliency. In the Yan Lab, I spent many cumulative nights running biological assays that would lead to inconclusive results. While these results were demotivating, pushing forward and continuing experimentation until that eventual key finding taught me that research is not without its share of failures. As I continued to conduct biology research and became better in the lab, I became increasingly aware of the impact health behaviors have in starting cancer, particularly in the Charlotte community. As a result, I decided I wanted to become involved with public health research to help prevent these negative health behaviors from occurring.

Due to my interest in patient care as well as my budding interest in public health, I was connected with Dr. Michael Dulin, Director of the Academy of Public Health Innovation at UNC Charlotte. Speaking with Dr. Dulin about my interests in cancer and its prevention, particularly in tobacco cessation, as many cancers are directly linked to smoking behavior, I was offered an opportunity to work under Dr. Dulin and the Mecklenburg County Public Health Department on the Tobacco-Free Behavioral Health Policy Project. Working under Dr. Dulin, a physician-scientist, allowed me to experience how physician-scientists can utilize their own clinical

expertise in guiding their research processes, while also tailoring research processes with the patient in mind. Through this project, along with two graduate students, we were able to assess and help design a tobacco-free smoking policy that was implemented on January 1st, 2021 at nine different behavioral health facilities, amassing to about 8,000 individuals affected, within the Charlotte region. With this being a novel policy and research study, I was able to write the Internal Review Board application as well as develop the qualitative interview and quantitative surveys for the study of the policy. Working with the team, we were able to conduct 39 patient interviews and 27 staff surveys on tobacco usage and sentiments toward the tobacco free policy and its relevance to their treatment. Based on our findings, we were able to provide policy recommendations which were implemented throughout Charlotte-Mecklenburg County that improved the health and well-being of these patients. This exposure to public health research broadened my perspective to the immense impact public health policies can play in improving patient health, beyond that of which the creation of novel cancer therapies may potentially have. Direct exposure to patients in a research setting also allowed me to understand the importance of understanding the root cause of any illness or disease.

Ultimately, these experiences jump started my interest in research and made me aware of the immense impact research can have as a means for social change. Since then, I have been able to conduct research in a variety of settings and disciplines, ranging from health economics research studies through a summer internship at the U.S. Census Bureau in D.C., to customer discovery research for my NSF backed start-up, SolCooking. I have been able to present my research and receive awards from UNC Charlotte’s Undergraduate Research Conference to the American Public Health Association’s National Research Conference. As an extension of my interests in engaging more students in health research, I was able to develop and instruct my own course on campus focused on researching and designing interventions in health disparities utilizing my Civic Engagement Grant and help from the Clinton Foundation. In the end, research went from being a burden to an essential aspect for everything I do, so much so that I envision a future career as a physician-scientist where I can care for patients clinically but also help shape research-driven public health policies among the communities I serve.





*Amogh's start-up SolCooking's logo, which is supported by the NSF Innovation Corps.*



*Dr. Dulin and Amogh pose for a photo on Charlotte's beautiful campus.*



*(top) Working through his internship in the U.S. Census Bureau, Amogh beams in front of the U.S. Capitol building.  
(bottom) Dr. Yan and Amogh proudly stand beside Norm the Niner.*



# THE CROSS-COUNTRY DOCUMENTARY: Finding Myself Through Others

By Matt Lower '23

This past March, I found myself in a difficult position; my study abroad had just been cancelled, and the window for most summer internships in my field had been closed. With such a short window of time left before my summer began, I had no idea what I would end up doing with my summer. I was prepared to let yet another summer of opportunity be heavily constricted by the pandemic, but then something my fellow scholars said to me set off a lightbulb in my head. My Levine cohort had gathered on campus to catch up, and naturally, the topic of everyone's summer plans came up. As everyone talked about the varying opportunities they had across the country, I realized how amazing these opportunities were when viewed against each other; The wide range of summer experiences taking place truly showcased the uniqueness of the Levine Scholars Program, and how it empowers each and every scholar to embark on their own personal journey. As this idea hit me, I realized this was something that could be showcased and captured through video. It seemed like a great chance to strengthen my knowledge of film and video production, a degree I am pursuing here at Charlotte. I spoke to my fellow scholars about visiting during the summer, and they were ecstatic about the idea. I thought it over for a few days, and my will to pursue the idea grew larger and larger. By that weekend, I had made up my mind: I decided to take my summer into my own hands, and create a cross-country documentary showcasing the summer experiences of my fellow scholars.

Even though I had brought up my idea with members of my cohort, I don't think anyone actually expected it to happen. It's not that they didn't believe in me, but this project just seemed like one of those things people always talk about doing, but never actually do. After being locked indoors for a year, I was determined to make it happen. To make this idea solid and actionable, there was a good amount of prep work that had to be done. I spent May through June getting the idea approved with the Levine office, securing a creative mentor in the UNC Charlotte film department, and creating a detailed itinerary for my travels. Now, these things may seem somewhat simple, but the travel itinerary in particular was difficult. The three subjects I decided to center my documentary around were in three opposite corners of the country. To make it more difficult, all of them were not in areas easily accessible by airports. After spending a good amount of time lining up schedules and different forms of travel, I had finally crafted a plan consisting of buses to the Mexican border, trains through the Nevadan desert, and a road trip fourteen hours up the east coast. When the latter half of the summer finally came, it was time to embark on this journey I had laid out for myself.

Getting to make this project as my summer experience was an amazing opportunity that opened my eyes to many different areas and ways of life I was not familiar with. I experienced a deep gratitude for my living situation when I went and worked with Xavier Gomez at the Mexican border. Volunteering for a day at a migrant facility was extremely humbling, I learned a lot about the obstacles many migrating families face. Journeying to Nevada to meet with McKenzie Miller was an immersive lesson in what the mining business is really like. I learned about the industry, the different jobs



*Matt Lower (Left) and McKenzie Miller '23 smile for the camera, as McKenzie dons her mining attire to walk Matt through what a day in her mining internship is like.*



*Matt Lower '23 gets ready to start filming his interview with McKenzie Miller '23 in Nevada.*



*Xavier Gomez '23 smiles as he walks Matt through what a day is like volunteering in a migrant facility on the Mexican/American border.*

and tasks, and I met a lot of passionate people who were ecstatic to talk about what they do. Finally, seeing Cameron Mercer as a counselor at a summer camp in the woods of Maine was a nice reminder of how simple life can be sometimes. Cameron was truly in his element getting to do physical activities in the outdoors, and his pure enjoyment seemed to rub off on the younger campers. Though each stop along my journey was very different, they were also the same in a way. Each place I went, I met people who were passionate about what they did, ecstatic to tell me about it, and were dedicated to the ideals of community and service. After being stuck inside for a year, this project re-ignited my passion for helping and bonding with others, and it also helped me grow as a filmmaker. Even now as I put the project together, the positive energies of the places I went bleed through the screen, and I hope it does to everyone who views my project as well. If you are interested in viewing the project, it will be premiering on mattlower.net in early January, right before the start of the new semester.



# LEARNING TO BUILD: The Importance of Volunteering

By MacKenzie Ridge '25

September 18th a group of twelve Levine Scholars stepped onto a Habitat for Humanity build site. We arrived at 8am and prepared for what, from the outside, seemed like a long, hot day of hammering nails. And don't get me wrong, it was, but between Annabeth, William, and me, (the first years at the build) we left with far more than sore hands in mind. At the build site we stared at an empty lawn nestled behind the beginnings of a home and it stared right back. Piles of wood and power tools, of which I attempted to stay far away from, mocked our morning grogginess, but out of nowhere a ball of energy, better known as our build leader Hugo, appeared. With a guiding spirit he pointed every which way and we found ourselves consumed in nailing boards or sawing wood.

I picked up a power drill for the first time and shakily began constructing the foundation for a shed. Annabeth was working across from me digging out a base for cinder blocks to serve as the support for the shed. Levines worked side by side adapting a rhythm for screwing in and yanking out misplaced screws, mostly mine, as perfectly measured boards turned into a floor over an hour of cooperation. My hands were beginning to blister just as I felt my cheeks become sore from the smile I could not wipe from my face. I began to hold the power tools with confidence and purpose, a stark contrast from my unsure attitude just an hour before. We hammered nails into floorboards and all experienced the same relief with every swing. Any pent up energy and feelings were energized by the hammer in hand and encouraged by sentiments of "just let all of your anger out!" from Dr. Smith. It sounded like a battlefield as far as I could tell from all of the hammer to nail collisions and echoing sighs of exhaustion. Just when I thought another swing of a hammer would compromise my arm altogether, we gathered on the porch inhaling water bottles and snacking on granola bars when what began as a random conversation became

timely. Dr. Zablotsky and Dr. Smith began sharing their experiences with gentrification in urban areas and housing in major cities. Dr. Smith spoke about her own witnessing of the gentrification of Vancouver, the displacement of people, rise of poverty, and the dismantling of affordable housing and individual's forced houselessness. Dr. Zablotsky spoke of her time living near the University of Southern California's campus in LA and the lack of affordable housing resulting in impoverished areas and



MacKenzie Ridge '25 gets ready to continue nailing along the chalk lines.



The Levine Crew stands in front of the shed they have just built after a long day's work.

neighborhoods. A very appropriate topic of conversation for a Habitat for Humanity build considering Habitat's efforts support families pushed out of Charlotte or who are unable to afford housing in the urban area as it further develops and gentrifies surrounding areas. Hearing about their experiences, Hugo chimed in with his own experiences working with Habitat in gentrified areas and the impact it has on thousands of families. After savoring the shade there were a couple more hours of work to be done, but the mood was energized with purpose and fulfillment after hearing about the tangible difference my sore hands were slowly making.

Looking at the yard after three hours, the pile of wood was now four walls and a floor waiting to be placed. We began to assemble the shed and with each wall being lifted each scholar took a side working together to hold ladders, drill screws to stabilize the walls, and hammer in even more nails. Swiftly, we built the roof and were able to stand underneath and within the fruits of our labor. Hugo handed us each a sharpie and urged us to write a message or sign our names inside the shed before the next crew painted over the boards. Some wrote Levine Scholars 2021 with their name or advocated for LGBTQ+ rights while I signed my name with a doodle knowing it would be covered up, but that didn't matter much after a long day. Eternally we will remain a part of the story of that house and our shed before it became a home and some extra storage space.

There was reciprocity between the shed and myself that day. The impression of my sharpie signature inside the small shed imply the same permanence the build day had on me. I left the build with less energy, but more gratitude for what I have and what I can do to help those with less. Annabeth and I joined the UNC Charlotte Habitat chapter's executive board right after that first build. The feeling of gratitude and productive service is one I wish I could bottle. Volunteering has a lasting impact when there are tangible results and a reputable mission like Habitat for Humanity's.

# THE KINO CONNECTION...WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

By Xavier Gomez '23

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*Xavier Gomez (Front Left) spends time with other full-time volunteers and workers at Kino on a desert hike.*

Good bean, good bean, bad bean, good bean, bad bean. Our hands sift over the hard pinto bodies, dumped onto the table moments before, searching for pebbles and flaws in their shells. The beans rattle together, soothing our minds while we work in silence. Jaime\* and I had been sitting in the cafeteria “cleaning beans” for the past 30 minutes and very little had been said. He was a migrant who I’d seen around the Kino facility for the past few days, usually trying to use the phone to call home. I didn’t know his story, but it was usually best to allow conversation to start from the migrant’s side, especially if they looked as distressed as he did. Suddenly, Jaime asked

an unexpected question - “What kind of music do you listen to?” This question started a lengthy conversation around our music tastes (he liked “the romantic stuff”), which eventually turned into talks of our homes. He had seen North Carolina on the TV, and talked of the pretty beaches, apparently quite similar to his native Honduras.

At the mention of his country his thoughts grew dark and he confided heavier things. He was wanted by gangs in Honduras and fled the country in search of safety in the U.S. Somehow, he had made the 2,000+ mile journey to Nogales, a bordertown split in half by a wall



*Yellow Aprons, embroidered with each staff/volunteer member's name, wait to be put on before the start of the day. Migrants know that anyone with an apron on is a resource for them if they need anything.*



dividing Arizona and Mexico. His bad luck continued here, as he was kidnapped by the cartels, tortured, and held for ransom before escaping into the town. By sitting here and sorting beans, he was attempting to keep out of the street and away from the men searching for him. His story was and still is not unique. I wonder how many others sat in that cafeteria, attempting to do the same. The migrants at the border are a people with truly few options. To return to their home countries would be death or starvation and to stay in Nogales while their asylum claims processed for months or years meant risking human traffickers and unscrupulous con artists. Throughout Jaime's story, I was queueing up musical artists on my phone that he had suggested. We got a laugh out of the number of songs I knew (none). I find myself thinking of Jaime from time to time, especially when one of those "romantic songs" comes across my playlist. I hope he's okay now.

The conditions that have been created at the border are due to a variety of factors. However, the American and Mexican governments' refusal to allocate resources is responsible for a large gap in how migrants are treated. This gap in tools that migrants can use is where a network of binational organizations like the Kino Border Initiative (KBI) have stepped in. Some provide resources like KBI does, others do water drops in the desert, and some run full shelters.

I worked 5 to 6 days a week at KBI for two months. Each morning I would drive down from the small ranching town in Arizona where I was staying, park my car, and cross the border on foot through a checkpoint. Once at KBI, I would greet hundreds of migrants who had gathered at the door on my way in. There were always a number of tasks to be done, such as cooking, first aid, clothing distribution, serving plates, or running other errands around the town. We would work until around 2pm, at which point I would switch to meeting with the operations director, Victor, to conduct process improvement work for the facility using some of my systems engineering training. My main projects focused on the clothing distribution center, or ropería. The Jesuit facility is mostly run by clergy, although you wouldn't know it just by looking around the building. No one wore their official uniform. I worked closely with a Mexican nun and eventually developed protocol ideas on serving migrants and transporting donations across the border (it's harder than you would expect) with her. The KBI philosophy of service centered around dignity is a teaching from her that I carry with me constantly.

Dignity is an essential human element. One that allows for people to write their own stories. Despite desperate circumstances, these migrants are truly doing their utmost to create joy in their own lives and choose the best path for them and their families. You would think that the stark reality of the work at KBI would make the place somber, and every now and then it was, but usually it was a place of human connection. I fondly remember making arts and crafts and playing air-sports (we didn't have a ball) with the kids that came through the facility and chatting up their parents about the foods in their hometowns. The staff members were warm and the full-time volunteers like myself, mostly college students from around the U.S., bonded quickly in a NOLS-like atmosphere. We went to the lake on the weekends and often would go out for tacos or a Sonoran hot dog. It was with the support of this group that everyone was able to thrive given the deep conversations that were being had daily. Migrant families grew to recognize me, and vice versa. We would check up on each other. It felt great to have a mother tell me with a smile that her son got the burn medication that he needed, when I knew she had been looking for some for a few days.

During one such conversation, with a guy who was probably about my age, we started speaking about his journey through the desert. Dressed in the mottled camouflage clothing that the cartel forces migrants to buy when they attempt to cross, he was humble about his last week. Nonchalantly, he revealed that he left home in search of work to feed his family and followed the North star, but was eventually picked up by the border patrol near Tucson. In between a mouthful of rice and beans, he asked me a question: "What would you do?" I think about this question often. I did not have a good answer for him then. However, I know there are steps I, or any other person with the privilege of being a US citizen, can take to help the people at the border. Advocate for an end to xenophobic and life-endangering policies such as the "Remain in Mexico" program, and vote for representatives who have knowledge of conditions at the border and want to make a proactive change there instead of a reactive one. Donate to organizations that provide aid to displaced people. And finally, be kind - one never knows how far a person has had to walk to be where they stand now.

*\*Names of individuals have been changed to protect their identity.*

# DIGITALLY LEARNING ABOUT MEDICAL GENETICS

By Saad Jalisi '23

*Saad beams as he returns to campus after more than a year of virtual learning, prepared to apply all the skills he learned in a virtual world to his academics and pre-professional experiences.*



Throughout the Fall 2020-Spring 2021 school year, I volunteered with Patient Education at Atrium Health's Levine Cancer Institute. Despite the ever evolving and ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing guidelines, the virtual nature of my service provided me the opportunity to continue volunteering. I received training in health literacy and plain-language written communication, so I could relay medical information to patients in the most comprehensible way possible. I helped to develop clinical and non-clinical learning topics, like proper social distancing information and exercising during the pandemic. After covering the basics for Patient Education volunteering, I soon dove into a yearlong project, where I worked on reviewing and editing a genetics education portfolio.

Spanning dozens of documents, I reviewed educational materials related to gene types and their roles in cancer development. Different genetic mutations would result in a variety of changes in cancer treatment, such as dietary shifts and chemotherapy. The cancer-education information I covered provided an in depth yet understandable approach to learning about cancer in people's lives. Aside from the medical information itself, how could I convey potentially complex medical information in the best way possible?

I dedicated much of my time to formatting each Patient Education document. With specific spacing, fonts, and organization in mind, I created materials that best catered to the visual aspect of people's learning. I used particular, uniform guidelines to shape each genetics document in order to produce consistency that would make it most

readable for patients. Across any learning material, a patient could rely on where in any document they would find certain information. For instance, topic headings related to cancer symptoms, testing, or safety would be in the same location of each Patient Education document and described using similar wording. Familiarity, in the mind of my volunteering team, would breed comfort in the uncomfortable conversations surrounding cancer. Above all, despite not being able to directly speak to patients, I am grateful to have been able to provide any sort of help to patients and the greater Atrium Health community. I learned an incredible amount about virtual learning and teaching in the medical setting, and I hope to continue applying what I have learned in my daily academic and professional life.





# THE BULBETTES

By Natalie Bates & Kaitlyn Gosline '24

As our sophomore summer approached and we began connecting to nonprofits, both of us sat at a picnic table on campus with some other scholars from our class discussing our potential internships. Natalie mentioned having met with The Bulb and how she would be interning with them for the upcoming summer, so Kaitlyn assumed she would not get to work with this awesome organization because of how unusual it is for two Levine Scholars to be placed at the same nonprofit. However, days later The Bulb agreed to take on two interns, and the rest is history. Because of The Bulb's small grassroots structure, we were both able to contribute meaningful work and help support the organization's small team together.

The Bulb's mission is "to provide mostly local produce, as well as education on health and wellness, to food insecure communities." Throughout our summer we worked on multiple programs and projects that contributed to the mission. We helped run many of the 10+ markets, packing up the veggie branded van, named Bubba, with fresh produce from local farms and food rescued from Trader Joes, and setting up a farmers market style booth for it to be distributed to communities around the city. With the first year we lived in Charlotte being during COVID, driving around the city meeting different community members and customers connected us to Charlotte and helped us to get to know this city's neighborhoods. We also spent time sorting the food we rescued from Trader Joes. This "rescue" partnership allows The Bulb to get produce to the people while reducing food waste. During the days with less markets we worked on individual projects. Kaitlyn researched existing nutrition education programs around the country and started planning how The Bulb could reintroduce such programs to their markets post COVID. She also worked with their marketing manager on updating the website to make it more modern and easier to read on mobile, bringing some of her design and computer science experience. Natalie spent her days pouring over Excel spreadsheets of raw data collected from the markets and analyzing said data for later use in grant applications and statistics to show to potential investors.

We had the opportunity to work a few of these weekly markets together which gave us the opportunity to get to know each other better, discuss connections between what The Bulb is doing and what we learned in First-Year seminar, and brainstorm ideas for how we and the Levine Scholars Program could continue to be involved in The Bulb's mission. Now that we are back in Charlotte for the school year both of us make an effort to go out and volunteer at markets around the city when our class schedules allow, inviting fellow scholars to join us, and thanks to The Bulb's presence around the city there are plenty of options to match nearly any schedule. Currently, Natalie is continuing formal work with The Bulb via a nonprofit consulting opportunity with the Business Honors Program. Through this year-long consulting project, Natalie and her team of BHP peers will analyze The Bulb's business structure and regularly collaborate with the employees of The Bulb to provide applicable solutions to issues the organization feels they can improve. There are multiple markets every week that have online sign ups through The Bulb's website for anyone who is looking for ways to volunteer and help The Bulb's cause of getting "Produce to the People!" We hope to see others out there soon!



(top) Everyone strikes a pose with some mystery spicy peppers, after a taste test by Natalie (back), reveals they were indeed spicy peppers. (middle) Natalie and Kaitlyn work alongside volunteers during a market event, with adapted COVID protocols in place to increase safety while still serving the public. (bottom) Natalie stands behind a produce stand, where individuals could come and receive produce they needed as well as flowers to brighten their days.





# CAVE CRAWLING, RAFTING, AND DEALING WITH HEIGHTS: MY JOURNEY IN LEADERSHIP THROUGH VENTURE

*By Zeke Van Dehy '22*

## **What is Venture and what does Venture do?**

Venture Outdoor Leadership is an official Charlotte department that provides enriching experiential opportunities for personal growth and leadership development. Any Charlotte student might interact with Venture through small group team-building mobiles, team challenges through the on-campus ropes courses, or student-led outdoor trips like backpacking, rock climbing, or white water rafting. Venture student leaders, known as VOLTS, are trained to lead all of these activities through Venture's academic courses that they offer for anything Venture does. Better yet, academic courses are available to all students who are interested.

## **What is it like to be a VOLT?**

I started my Venture journey during my second semester in college by taking the Introduction to Outdoor Education course. Along with the Venture principles of personal growth, leadership development, and experiential learning, this course introduces you to team building as you learn to facilitate mobiles. At the end of the semester, I enjoyed my time so much that I decided to apply to become a VOLT and continue being a part of the community. Every semester since, I have led at least one backpacking trip and facilitated a handful of team-building mobiles. Through these experiences, not only have I seen hundreds of students grow, become friends, and appreciate the Blue Ridge Mountains a little more, but I have seen my own ability to lead a group improve dramatically. I used to absolutely love to hear myself talk and I naturally assumed that's what made me a good leader. Since then, I have learned to use my voice more strategically and to create atmospheres that invite others to feel confident sharing their voices as well. I still love to hear myself talk, but at least now I don't automatically demand attention and unintentionally get in the way of other people's contributions.

I can't talk about Venture without bringing up my experiences backpacking, caving, and white water rafting. Venture outdoor trips are an absolute hoot! Any student with any amount of experience is welcome to come on a trip and truly appreciate the amazing landscapes and wildlife that North Carolina has to offer. You would be surprised by how much people grow and connect with each other during these trips. I have seen so many friendships being made and fears being conquered on these trips, and I always come away from them in awe of what just a little time in nature can do for people.

I'm usually the "riddle guy" on these trips, which I think comes from all of the riddles that I learned on my NOLS trip 4 years ago. In many ways, my time with Venture feels like an extension of all of the good parts of NOLS ~ outdoors, good people, leadership, and personal reflection. But, it feels even better because Venture allows me to genuinely connect with people from Charlotte that I would never have met otherwise. Not to mention the backpacking packs aren't as heavy!

## **Why Venture?**

What makes Venture special is the people. The community is made up of optimistic and inclusive people who are excited to share their positivity and love for adventure. The people who commit their time and energy to being a part of this community are the kind of people that you always want to be surrounded by. Everyone is a great listener and authentically want to connect with people to make their days better. When I look back on my life in college, it wouldn't be the same without Venture. I think this program is one of the most incredible things that this university has to offer and I recommend that anyone and everyone try to engage with it in some capacity. Whether it's racing down a river in a raft full of people you've never met, clutching to a partner and staring straight ahead on a high ropes course, or taking a class to learn more about backpacking, there is an amazing experience waiting for everyone.



*(left) Zeke smiles as he continues along a trail of deadfall on the Appalachian Trail, reminiscent of his NOLS experience years earlier. (middle) Leading a caving trip in Tawney's Cave, Blacksburg, VA; everyone stands in awe of the amazing rock formations underground. (right) Guiding individuals through a start of the semester program on the high ropes course, Zeke helps individuals navigate technical skills while focusing on team-building and confidence.*



# CONNECTING THE DOTS

By McKenzie Miller '23

Gazing down the pitch-black tunnel ahead, I flip on my headlamp. The concrete reinforced walls and ceiling are illuminated and a lazily flapping air duct above confirms fresh air is flowing. The lead geologist and I hop off our John Deere tractor and slosh through puddles of groundwater up to our knees, sweltering in the heat and humidity. It's my first day going underground in the mine. I try to block irrational thoughts about the vent failing. The staff geologist treks towards a pile of rubble and twisted rebar at the end of the tunnel. She investigates chunks of freshly blasted rock, looking for ore. I hold my breath, still timid getting too close to the unstable end of the tunnel...then thud! Splash! I yelp and jump out of my skin, falling backward into a puddle. I wait for the impending collapse...then look up to see the culprit of the sound: a tiny clod of mud that dropped from the ceiling. The other geologist is laughing. As I sat on the ground I remember thinking, 'How did I get here?'

As a freshman, I was inspired by upperclassmen Levine scholars with all their accomplishments and experiences. They had studied abroad in Namibia and South Africa and Jerusalem, interned in national parks and New York City and DC, presented research at national conferences and more. Levine put me in the position to do those things, but I didn't know where to begin. I couldn't even settle on a major, let alone start doing groundbreaking research. In seminar, we discussed Steve Jobs' story about only being able to connect the dots of your life story in hindsight. That sounded great to a lost freshman trying anything from premed to mechanical engineering to environmental science to architecture. Still, I couldn't believe I'd ever be able to look back and find any logic to the scattered dots I was putting down.

It's now fall of my Junior year. I just finished an incredible summer internship doing exploration geology in the Nevadan desert, recently presented my research at the Geological Society of America conference in Portland, Oregon and am counting down the days to a spring semester in the French Alps. I have an exciting summer lined up doing geology field work in the Central Idaho wilderness and know what I want to do for grad school. Suddenly I'm in the position to do some rearview connect the dots.

I was very lucky to find geology, a subject I enjoy so much I listen to an embarrassing number of rock themed podcasts. The journey to get here shouldn't be understated, though. Freshman year, I tried on 3 different majors and considered countless others. None felt right. I felt like a failure for not loving school anymore. It seemed everyone around me was finding their stride, leaving me behind. Ultimately, I decided to be honest with myself about what I want from a major and career. I wanted challenging applied science, but I also wanted something hands on and outdoors. Initially, I thought love for the outdoors and a professional career couldn't be related. It turns out, love of hiking and camping is an asset in geologic work. It's easy to see the fit now, connecting the dots backwards.

At the end of freshman year, I got involved in a side geology research project somewhat related to my nonprofit internship with Catawba Lands Conservancy. I wasn't a geology person yet, but the project sounded interesting. Realizing I enjoyed that process, I entered the major. With the professor I connected with over the summer, I picked up more advanced research during the sophomore school year. Then, I applied for random internships... one of which was gold exploration in Nevada. I spent the summer in the 110° desert mapping mountains, modeling gold deposits hidden under yards of rock and learning as much as I could. It scratched my itch for outdoor adventure as well as challenging science; it felt right. My boss advised me to attend a national geology conference to learn about

*There's Gold in These Rocks! The team gets excited when they discover Arsenic (bright orange) as Arsenic often indicates Gold is nearby.*



*McKenzie reps UNC Charlotte from the top of an active volcano-Lassen Peak in Lassen National Park, Northern CA.*



*Standing in the open pit of an active Gold Mine, McKenzie feels closer to Norm the Niner than ever!*

current research for grad school. So, I turned my school year research into something presentable. At the conference, I met professors who study the topics I loved over the summer full time and are interested in grad students who enjoy field work.

Looking back, the dots all connect. I stopped trying to predict the future, trying to figure out how I'd end up with as many cool stories as Levine's past. I followed my interests without worrying where they would take me, staying true to myself and the type of work I love. Levine gave me the space to try on many different hats. When I shook the idea that there was a "correct" hat for me to wear, I unknowingly set myself on a more exciting path than I ever could've planned.

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# The Levine Scholars Program

The Levine Scholars Program is a four-year scholarship that includes full tuition, room, board and four summer experiences, including study abroad, which will develop leadership skills and social awareness. In 2010, the inaugural class of Levine Scholars

enrolled at UNC Charlotte and approximately 20 scholarships are awarded to high school seniors every year. The Levine Scholarship is valued at \$105,000 for in-state students and \$155,000 for out-of-state students over four years.



*Levine Scholars Group Photo Fall 2019. Classes of '20, '21, '22, and '23.*

Levine Scholars are talented high school seniors from across the United States whose accomplishments epitomize the values of philanthropists Sandra and Leon Levine, including a demonstrated commitment to community service, intellectual curiosity and the capacity for ethical leadership. Through community engagement, mentoring relationships with civic and business leaders in Charlotte, and a rigorous academic program, Levine Scholars develop the characteristics necessary to produce positive change in the communities in which they live and work. Scholars are able to turn their community service interest into actions with community service grants of \$8,000 to support their work in the community.

It is this unique connection to Charlotte – its resources, leaders and challenges – that differentiates this program from other scholarships of its kind. The program is specifically designed to expose Levine Scholars to the urban culture of a thriving city and to engage them in service to address needs of the citizens of Charlotte.