

FRIENDS & NEIGHBORS

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CRUISIN' THE THAMES — The group of students chosen by the Union City Rotary Club to tour seven European countries recently wasted no time seeing the sites. On the first day of the trip, they took a cruise down London's Thames River seeing iconic British landmarks, such as the over 120-year-old Tower Bridge. The group included (from left) Hannah Flatt, Jacob Virgin, Bailey Jo Griffith (mostly hidden), Will Suiter, Kaleigh Wagner, Kendraya Maddox, Matthew Hooks, Olivia Barker, Caitlynn Morton and Garrett Foster, all of who are rising seniors from the three local high schools.



LEADING FEARLESSLY — It takes a special type of person to agree to traveling all over Europe with 10 17-year-old kids — none of which are their own. It's a tough job, but someone has to do it. This year, those someone were Heather and Jason Kendall. Mrs. Kendall is the guidance counselor at Obion County Central High School. The couple was happy to take on the group of kids, treating them like their own children. The Kendalls weren't strangers to the UC Rotary Trip program. Their daughter, Anna Kendall, was selected to visit Washington, D.C., with the program last summer.



INSPIRING ARTISTS — The students in the Union City Rotary Club travel group must have gotten inspired by the sites they visited, as they attempted to create more artistic and unique photographs. The students (clockwise from left) Garrett Foster, Matthew Hooks, Will Suiter, Hannah Flatt, Jacob Virgin, Olivia Barker, Kendraya Maddox, Kaleigh Wagner, Bailey Jo Griffith and Caitlynn Morton tried out a unique pose in a beautiful church with intricate carvings and an ornate organ in Innsbruck, Austria.

UC Rotary Club provides great opportunities for local students

By MEGAN DAME
Staff Reporter

Imagine someone offering you an 11-day trip, touring seven different European countries and you pay nothing towards it. Airfare, accommodations, even your food are free.

That is exactly what the Union City Rotary Club does for 10 rising seniors from Obion County Central, South Fulton and Union City High Schools every summer as part of its travel program.

The students apply the summer before their junior year of high school begins. The lucky few are chosen after a grueling application and interview process and are named that November.

Yay! You were picked! You can just sit back and wait for next summer, right? No way.

Between November and the end of the next July, the selected students and their two chaperones are charged with meeting up to study the places they will be visiting and make suggestions on what activities and sites they should see.

The meetings are about more than that, however. They are also about getting to know their travel companions and forming bonds with them.

No one wants to travel with a stranger or even worse, someone they don't enjoy being around. This is especially true since the students are virtually cut off from their real lives while on the trip. Throughout the trip, the students will speak to their parents only once and are forbidden to bring their cellphones or any other personal electronic device with them.

The reasoning behind these rules are to force the students to interact with one another, to enjoy and actually see what the Union City Rotary Club is paying for them to see and to help fight homesickness.

Many teenagers groan at the idea of losing their cellphones, but the students always feel it od worth it in the end. The experiences they have and the bonds they make last much longer than any selfie.

The lucky students chosen for the 2018 trip were Olivia Barker, Garrett Foster, Matthew Hooks, and Kaleigh Wagner from Obion County Central High School, Hannah Flatt, Bailey Jo Griffith, Kendraya Maddox, Will Suiter and Jacob Virgin from Union City High School; and Caitlynn Morton from South Fulton High School. Their chosen chaperones were OCCHS guidance counselor Heather Kendall and her husband, Jason.

The Kendalls had never

served as chaperones for the Rotary program before, but they were very familiar with it as their daughter, Anna Kendall, was chosen for the UC Rotary trip to Washington, D.C., last year.

Immediately, the Kendalls began planning group meetings and working with Marilyn Ross from Journeys Unlimited Travel Agency, who organized the group's entire trip, including a tour with COSMOS tour groups. The trip was packed full, covering seven countries in 11 days.

The group first traveled to London, England, where they cruised the Thames River and visited the iconic British landmarks before heading on to Brussels, Belgium and a river cruise into Germany.

Germany held many stops along the Romantic Road which winds through multiple medieval-era villages, some with their original medieval battlements and gates. From Germany, the group traveled through Austria and Switzerland by way of the Swiss Alps.

Taking a tram to the top of Mount Stanserhorn in Switzerland is a favorite tradition of several Rotary student groups. From the Alps, the group headed to Lake Lucerne, Switzerland, where the lake's water is so crystal clear, one can see straight to the bottom.

France is where the group ended their journey with a grand finale of sightseeing that included the Eiffel Tower and the Louvre museum. It never fails to be one of the most anticipated stops on the trip and never fails to impress.

"The trip was simply spectacular. It was interesting to see just how different but also similar places and people can be across the pond," student Jacob Virgin said.

When the group returned home they were exhausted, but one thing they were never too tired to do, was express their gratitude to everyone who had helped provide this once-in-a-lifetime trip for them.

Matthew Hooks said, "The opportunity we were provided was unlike any other. The memories, friendships and experiences we shared are unforgettable. Without Mrs. Heather and Mr. Jason, my trip would have been completely different. I'm so grateful for every second I spent with all of these people on this trip. Thank you Union City Rotary!"

Their gratitude is the only payment the Rotary Club needs, as they believe they are helping the local youth to be stronger, better citizens. A trade-off that is worth its weight in gold.



PICTURE PERFECT — Union City Rotary travelers (from left) Kendraya Maddox, Matthew Hooks, Kaleigh Wagner, Bailey Jo Griffith, Will Suiter, Caitlynn Morton, Garrett Foster, Hannah Flatt, Olivia Baker and Jacob Virgin found the perfect photo opportunity at Zubspitzblick and they didn't have to provide their own frame. Zubspitzblick is the highest mountain in Germany and is situated on the German-Austrian border.



MUGGLE BORN? — As all good wizards know, a visit to London's King's Cross railway station must include a stop at Platform 9 3/4, the platform to board the Hogwarts Express for young wizards heading off to the wizarding school of Hogwarts in J.K. Rowling's beloved Harry Potter book and movie series. Union City High School's Jacob Virgin may have some wizard's blood of his own, since he was able to locate the very secret location with ease.



SOAKING UP HISTORY — Rotary travel group members (front, from left) Kendraya Maddox, Caitlynn Morton, Bailey Jo Griffith, Kaleigh Wagner, Olivia Barker, (back) Matthew Hooks, Jacob Virgin (mostly hidden), Hannah Flatt, Garrett Foster and Will Suiter admired the Grand Place in Brussels, Belgium. The most prominent building is the Town Hall, with its 315-foot tower, which has seen the roughest of histories, including the Spanish Inquisition and both World Wars. Now, the building, which was built between 1402 and 1455, has been restored to its original beauty.



BEAUTIFUL SCENERY — One of the greatest rewards every travel group shares are the bonds they form with one another. After months of preparation and then having to rely on each other for safety, entertainment and a shoulder to cry on when someone gets homesick, it's no surprise they grow close. The girls of the group, including (from left) Hannah Flatt, Kendraya Maddox, Olivia Barker, Bailey Jo Griffith, Kaleigh Wagner and Caitlynn Morton, showed their closeness while in Lucerne, Switzerland.