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## Spring Breakers Work Hard in Big Easy

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# Spring Breakers Work Hard in Big Easy

A different kind of spring break brings aid to the people of New Orleans.



The above photo was taken outside of a house in Musicians Village, where students visited to learn more about the project. Top row, from left: Suman Gautam, a local New Orleans resident, Alissa Sherman, Teodora Petrova, Wesley Butler. Bottom row, from left: Aisha Mu'Min, Lorin Biosca, Krystyna Zwolinski, Sara Baldocchi.

Story by AMELIA BENNER '09

While some students returned to campus after spring break tanned from lying on the beach, others had soaked up the sun for a good cause. Fifty IWU students and 10 faculty members participated in this year's Alternative Spring Break (ASB), traveling to the Ninth Ward of New Orleans to assist in ongoing cleanup following Hurricane Katrina.

During their week-long stay, the volunteers donned work gloves and dust masks and wielded sledgehammers and wheelbarrows, rising at dawn to gut buildings, paint

houses, build a playground and assist local residents in rebuilding their lives.

Beyond their physical labor, though, the group also spread the word about their mission via a blog accessible at [blogs.iwu.edu/altbreak/](http://blogs.iwu.edu/altbreak/). "This trip has caused us to reevaluate what we stand for and how we choose to live our lives," one volunteer wrote anonymously on the blog after returning to campus. "We can all agree that what we have taken out of this trip is appreciating the smaller things that life has to offer, and that the simplest act of kindness can make a world of difference to someone else."

Even two years after the hurricane, the Ninth Ward is a sobering reminder of just how much the region has suffered — and is still suffering. Expanses of tall grass and brush cover what were once vibrant neighborhoods, and many homes and buildings are still in ruins.

“It seems, in the Ninth Ward, as though Katrina stopped time,” another volunteer wrote after a day spent working with residents of a local nursing home. A group of School of Nursing students led by Associate Professor of Nursing Kathryn Scherck screened residents for diabetes, checked blood pressure and performed other medical tasks.

The group volunteered with Operation Nehemiah, which has organized more than 13,000 workers to clean, gut and rebuild thousands of homes in and around New Orleans. The trip was organized through Break Away, a service-trip organization company that arranges volunteer projects for colleges and universities.

Planning for the trip began long before the group boarded their charter bus on the morning of March 15. According to assistant dean of students Kevin Clark, potential volunteers had to apply to be included. Once accepted, they attended a series of meetings and held numerous fundraisers — including bake sales, book drives and concession sales at Bloomington’s U.S. Cellular Coliseum — to raise money for the trip. ASB also benefited from the generosity of the IWU President’s Office, Dean of Students’ Office and the Student Volunteer Center.

Volunteers also took the opportunity to explore the city and enjoy the southern weather, sampling local cuisine and attending services at local churches. By chance, the trip coincided with the Christian Holy Week, and students were able to worship with the people of New Orleans before returning home to Illinois in time for Easter.

“Devastation, death and destruction are everywhere in New Orleans, and we got to witness that firsthand, and it was worse than any of us could have imagined,” Illinois Wesleyan Chaplain Hope Luckie wrote. “But the most amazing aspect of it all is that the people of New Orleans still have optimism, hope and faith that their city will be rebuilt — that their families and communities will be rebuilt.”

As the week went on, comments on the group’s blog reflected the emotions that characterize post-Katrina New Orleans: fear (some residents refused to open their doors to the volunteers), frustration, exhaustion, defiance — and hope.

“One day, things will get better here,” Erick Thronson ’10 wrote. “Neighborhoods will rebuild and communities will grow. For now, the people take it day by day. For us, it is about reaching out and helping one person at a time, showing the residents they aren’t forgotten, listening and doing what we can to build up this devastated community.”



**Nursing student Ginny Krawzak takes the blood pressure of a resident of the Lower 9th Ward.**