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New Orleans Destination for Alternative Spring Break

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – At 5 a.m. on Saturday, March 15, 50 Illinois Wesleyan University students and 10 faculty and staff members will board a charter bus headed for their spring break destination: a work site in a New Orleans district heavily hit by hurricane Katrina. They will volunteer with Operation Nehemiah through Friday, March 21.

Upon arrival, participants in the program known as Alternative Spring Break (ASB) will explore the Ninth Ward and French Quarter regions of New Orleans in which they will work, said ASB sponsor Kevin Clark, assistant dean of students.

Most of the volunteers will perform a variety of tasks that will change daily, but special arrangements have been made for a group of nursing students and Associate Professor of Nursing Kathy Scherck. “They are going to work specifically with healthcare issues,” said Clark. “They will be able to go into the community and use the skills they have from classroom training and clinical experience.”

“We don't know exactly what we will be doing while we are there so I am keeping a really open mind to everything,” said Sara Baldocchi, a senior psychology major from Glen Ellyn, Ill.

The trip was arranged through Break Away, a service trip organization company that provides a list of sites across the country and the world that want to work with or have worked with colleges or universities. ASB programs have been available at schools across the United States for a number of years, but the program was inaugurated at Illinois Wesleyan last year when Clark, Director of Fraternity and Sorority Life Danielle Kuglin, and a student organized an ASB trip to Pascagoula, Miss.

ASB publicity began at first-year orientation and during the first week of classes last August. “I think catching students right away made a difference in the number of volunteers,” said Clark, who expects that the program will continue to grow in future years.

Part of the ASB experience is the series of events that take place before and after the trip which include organizational meetings, orientation sessions, and fundraising efforts. This year's fundraisers included sales of baked goods, posters, and other items; a book drive and concession

sales at the U.S. Cellular Coliseum in Bloomington. The fundraisers helped to defray the remaining costs after the group received financial support from the President's Office, the Dean of Students' Office, and the Student Volunteer Center.

Clark believes that the most important part of the ASB experience is that the volunteers discuss the work that they do amongst each other and with the entire campus.

"We will get together and talk about what we've experienced because any time you take yourself out of one place and put yourself in another it can be very overwhelming," said Clark. "We will also discuss what the next step is following the trip. Students are concerned about turning this experience into opportunities once they return to campus and once they graduate."

The ASB program events will conclude on Wednesday, April 2 with the IWU chapel hour dedicated to Alternative Spring Break. "We will invite the president and the entire campus community to view pictures of the trip, talk about our experiences, and listen to the jazz combo play traditional New Orleans music," said Clark.

"I know I will get so much out of it personally, so this will definitely be a life-changing experience for everyone, those who we help and those of us who help," said Baldocchi. "I feel like this is something that I will remember for my whole life, so what better way to end my senior year than with something that will help make people's lives a little bit better?"

For additional information, contact Kevin Clark at (309) 556-3850.

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