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Students Build Habitat Homes During Spring Break

March 23, 2012

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — Illinois Wesleyan's chapter of Habitat for Humanity traveled to Mobile, Ala., over spring break to aid in construction of houses for underprivileged families. They were led by the Alternative Spring Break (ASB) program coordinator, University Chaplain Elyse Nelson Winger.

Upon their return, Nelson Winger responded to questions about the trip.

Q: How many students and faculty participated?

Thirty-five students, including two international students, participated in ASB, representing all four class years, many different majors, Registered Student Organizations, and athletic teams. Four faculty and staff (Professor Greg Shaw, Resident Director Doug Meyer, Senior Administrative Assistant to the Provost Patti Henderson, and I) also participated.



From left, Joe Daniels '13, Megan Thompson '12, Amanda Larsen '13, Becca Brait '15 and Lauren Burke '14 pose for a photo after house-painting work during Alternative Spring Break.

What drew this group together was an interest in doing service and sharing in the social justice work of Habitat for Humanity.

Q: What part of Mobile were you working in?

We worked in the Hillsdale neighborhood of Mobile, a neighborhood built originally for factory workers.

Habitat for Humanity of Southwest Alabama has been in the process of rehabilitating the housing stock and has, with residents and volunteers, already built more than 40 homes, with more on the way. What we saw, then, was a revitalizing community that came especially alive after 3 p.m. when buses dropped off school-aged children. Hillsdale is a lovely neighborhood with old trees and new two and three-bedroom ranch homes.

Q: What kind of work did the group do there?

Each day, our group divided into three teams and we were able to work in various houses, most nearing completion. Students painted, caulked, cleaned, installed trim, doors, knobs, and blinds, and set a driveway and sidewalk for cement and did yard work. One team focused on building a community garden in the neighborhood: we dug posts, raised and painted the fence, and prepared the ground for planting. One team also spent a half-day working in the affiliate's offices, painting freshly hung drywall.

Q: Beyond the actual home building, were there other experiences built into the trip designed to provide enlightenment or fun?

A highlight of the trip was attending a House Blessing for one of the homes in Hillsdale, for which we did "finishing touches." We weren't able to work with neighborhood residents, since most volunteer on evenings and weekends, so it was a delight to be able to meet a family who was moving into this beautiful home.

At the blessing, an extended family member (who already lived in a Habitat home around the corner) spoke about their journey to Mobile. After fleeing Burundi, they spent many years in refugee camps in Congo and Tanzania. When family members were finally able to immigrate to the United States, they learned of the Habitat program, and were so grateful to be able to work towards home ownership and stability. The family's gratitude and joy really impacted students and helped to embody our work.

We also enjoyed a gorgeous late afternoon on the white sand beaches of Dauphin Island, as well as a torrentially rainy Monday morning at the island's estuarium and historic Fort Gaines.



After working on houses, students enjoy time on the beach.

Q: Could you describe some moments from the trip that particularly stand out in your mind?

The students will tell you that a particularly memorable evening was a kayak and canoe paddle through Mobile Bay where alligators freely swim (and really don't give a hoot about humans). The group's laughter (and screams!) kept the alligators at bay, but the tales of canoes stuck in marsh grasses on a foggy night will probably grow taller with time.

Our hosts at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Mobile embodied the "Southern Hospitality" for which this region is praised. We felt so welcomed and well-cared for. (And the food was abundant!)

Q: Overall, what do you think is the benefit of a trip like this for students at this time in their lives?

Alternative Spring Break is an opportunity for students to practice and explore one of Illinois Wesleyan's core commitments: social justice. In the months preceding the trip, we talked about the work of Habitat and its part in eliminating poverty housing. We even did a "Housing Simulation" designed to give students a feel for what it is like to look for decent and affordable housing in America when you are low-income.

On the trip, we also spent an evening talking about immigration policy and our own family stories of migration. Because Alabama has one of the most restrictive set of policies surrounding immigration, we felt it was important to engage this issue as part of understanding the local context in which we served.

But ASB is more than even this. It is also about making unlikely friends in a new setting. Our group was diverse, and few people knew one another well. Many students shared their surprise and happiness about meeting new friends on this trip, and were also inspired to continue serving others in their local communities. Intense experiences like this have a way of setting students up for a lifetime of service and cement a commitment to the common good.