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Students Brave Rain, Interfaith Challenges on Alternative Spring Break

Story by Julia Savich '16; Photos by Anna Kerr-Carpenter '17

Three faculty and staff leaders and 21 students spent spring break volunteering with the Appalachia Service Project in Chavies, Kentucky. Following is physics major and Alternative Spring Break (ASB) leader Julia Savich's first-person account of the experience.

March 8

When going through everyone's "thorns and roses", or highs and lows, of the day, many students and faculty shared feelings about the hike we took at Natural Bridge State Resort Park, a halfway stop on our way to our final destination, Chavies, Ky. The hike was a suggestion by Assistant Professor of Physics Bruno deHarak, who lived in Kentucky for many years. "It was a perfect break from our long drive the day before," said ASB student leader and accounting major Sarah Sadowski '17. "It was also a perfect opportunity to bond with other ASB participants." The paths were slippery and icy, making

the three-fourths of a mile hike to the top of the natural bridge quite a challenge, but the sights at the top were undoubtedly worth the hour-long, slippery climb. The arch itself was breathtaking. Towering over the trail and brilliant burnt orange in color, it stood out from the snowy hills and dark trees leading up to it. We marveled at the beauty of nature around us. This is why more than half of the students mentioned the striking sights and the warmth of the sun while standing on top of the rocky arch during the group reflection at the end of the day.



The group posed at the top of Natural Bridge on a hike at the Natural Bridge State Resort Park.

Natural Bridge State Resort Park was an hour away from Chavies, Kentucky, so we hopped back into the vans for another hour once we finished our hike and lunch to proceed to our final destination. After driving up what is quite possibly a road steeper than Lombard Street in San Francisco, we arrived at the Appalachia Service Project (ASP) center in Chavies. The center was a large building situated on the top of the hill that had large dormer rooms for the men and women and a large common area for eating. Three other groups from Virginia Tech, Juniata College, and Wake Forest College were already settled in, and we enjoyed a nice buffet style dinner prepared for us by volunteer cooks who made all of our meals during the week.

The 24 of us from IWU were split up into four different work groups, ranging in size from five to seven people, and each group was assigned a different project for the week ahead. Three of the groups worked on weatherproofing and insulating homes, and one group worked on building a porch and digging a drainage ditch. Most people were not too keen on the challenges of working with insulation, but we all overcame that initial feeling because we came to build safer, warmer, drier homes, and installing proper insulation is one of the first steps toward that goal.

March 9

At first, being on the worksite seemed a little intimidating despite the many building experiences I have had in the past including: an ASP trip in 2008, many Habitat for Humanity builds in the Bloomington-Normal community, and the two past IWU Alternative Spring Break Habitat for Humanity trips to Laredo, Texas, and Albany, Georgia. ASP works a little bit differently in that the experienced volunteers visit the worksites rather than stay with the builders the entire time. Also, the five experienced ASP staffers had to oversee ten different worksites, so their visits were not as frequent as I was expecting. Another significant difference between Habitat for Humanity builds and ASP projects is that Habitat builds new homes and ASP



From left, Sarah Sadowski '17, Ashley Sons '18, Linda Zhang '18, Timur Chen '18 and Joshua Yoo '16 shovel gravel for a drainage ditch.

refurbishes pre-existing ones. This means that we had to adapt general building techniques to fit the unique qualities of each home, rather than start from scratch with all new materials and very standardized building practices. This proved to be the biggest challenge we had to overcome during the week.

Our assignment was to redo the skirting, or underpinning, around the bottom of our family's trailer home that was cracked and significantly weathered. "Mosey Monday" is what the ASP staff calls the first day at the worksite, which is a time to get acquainted with the family, gain a better understanding of the project, and bond with your work crew. My work crew, however, did not mosey very much.

After introducing ourselves to the couple we were working for, we removed the underpinning, and then we cleared debris from underneath the home. This process involved "army crawling" through the mud under the home. The clearance below the house ranged from three feet to a tight four inches, and at this point in the week, we were fairly timid when it came to squeezing into the dimly lit crawlspace. Not surprisingly, weatherizing the home was not the cleanest process. Once we removed all of the loose pieces of debris that we could reach, we then began the process of laying down a vapor barrier, or essentially a plastic tarp, on top of the ground under the house to keep as much water away from the preexisting insulation as possible. Initially, we were supposed to remove the preexisting insulation and vapor barrier from the home, but a day before we started the project, our homeowner changed his mind because he did not want us to remove the factory-installed insulation and risk a decrease in value of his home.

A good bonding experience between the members of our group and our homeowner arose when our homeowner's daughter was trying to turn her car around in the driveway and got her car stuck in the mud. We put in quite a lot of group effort attempting to rock her car out, but it was not freed until our homeowner pulled her car out with his own car while my group simultaneously pushed. Freeing a car stuck in the mud was a new experience for at least half of my group members, myself included.

In the evening we participated in a large group reflection with the other schools where we sang songs, discussed the socioeconomic gap between members of the Appalachian community, and talked about the beauty we found in the day. The ASP staff members led this gathering, and they continued to lead evening gatherings every day during the week.

As an IWU group, we did shout-outs where anyone can share something that stood out to him or her during the day that another IWU group member did. At this point in the week, most of the shout-outs were related to people initiating good work or learning how to use a new tool or jumping into a new situation. We also discussed what each group's project entailed.

March 10

The second day of work involved a lot less work at the worksites and more work within the ASP center due to consistent rain over the course of the day. My group cleaned and organized the ASP center's tool shed, and then we visited our worksite to check on the vapor barrier we laid out the day before to make sure the rain had not set back our work too significantly. After returning from the worksite, we painted one of the large hallways in the center.

Sarah Sadowski's group was one of the few to brave the rain and head to their worksite. The group spread gravel on the mountainous driveway to make it easier for the homeowners to drive up to their house without getting stuck in the mud, which turns out to be a common problem in the area. They returned at the end of the day after making a significant amount of progress, but not without a decent amount of mud caked on them.

Chris Crown '17 and Selena Greising '16 spent a lot of time fixing the showers in the center so that the rest of the groups could make use of them upon returning from the worksites. ORL staff member Kaitlin Ballard, the staff leader of the group containing Chris and Selena, was



Students had to crawl into some tight spaces to help weatherize a mobile home in the mountains of Kentucky. (Photo by Julia Savich)

very impressed by her group's ability to adapt and take on projects even with the challenges faced. All of the groups faced challenges due to the rain, but each group quickly took action to find meaningful work to do at the center. We also had a chance to bond with the other IWU work crew groups because multiple groups were back at the center working together.

The day ended with an evening gathering during which we learned about the tough life decisions coal miners must make when choosing between further education and mining. The ASP staffers posed a hypothetical scenario in which a father has black lung disease, and his son has to decide whether he will head to the mines where he can make enough money to support his family and pay for his father's medical bills or go to college on a full-ride scholarship, which in the long run will likely equip him to obtain a better-paying, less-risky job, but provides no immediate income. Many of the IWU groups leaned toward going to college to break the cycle of poor health due to working in the mines, but then realized that the son has to sacrifice the short-term well-being of his family in order to do so. Many of the groups from the other schools, where students have more knowledge of coal mining towns, chose coal mining for the son because of the immediate payoff and value of spending time with his ailing father. The scenario was a tough one, and there was no right answer.

March 11

On the third day of work, we went to our worksite and worked for the whole day despite light, intermittent rain showers. There was a significant amount of mud at our worksite, but after accepting the fact that we would end the day coated in mud, we had a fun time working hard. Our group finished army crawling underneath the house, braving the areas with only a 6-inch clearance. The process involved innovative thinking in order to smooth out the vapor barrier underneath the shortest areas under the house. We made good use of a tool that we called the "toothbrush:" a long, narrow board that had a wire brush attached to one end. The toothbrush helped us push the vapor barrier underneath the front porch where there was less than a 4-inch clearance. After we finished laying the vapor barrier, we were able to move forward to the first steps of building a small insulating wall around the bottom of the house by adding boards along the ground. A future group will attach the short walls.

The CEO of ASP visited our worksite and talked to us about the importance of getting younger adults involved in service projects like ASP. He made note of the fact that people who start volunteering early in life, tend to recognize the value of applying their developed skills to helping others. He was happy to see the progress we made and provided us with input into how we should proceed with some of the more challenging parts of our project.

Over the course of our time in Kentucky, we learned both building skills and general life skills. By the middle of the week, three of the four work crews rescued four different vehicles from the mud. Not only did Chavies see two feet of snow two weeks ago, it had also rained fairly consistently since then. All of the crews braved the elements on Wednesday and made significant progress on their projects.

During the group discussions, students made note of the patience of other students during teaching moments. A few students from other schools noted the rich diversity of religious backgrounds of the students from IWU. Since ASP is a religious program, there were many events that focused on Christianity, including devotions, evening discussions, and prayers before every meal. Most of the groups from the other schools were faith-based campus organizations. IWU students made note of their desire for more interfaith acknowledgement, but they also respected the strong religious foundations of ASP.

March 12

On Thursday, we lucked out with a beautiful day in terms of weather. The sun was shining brightly after two days of rain. We had a wonderful morning devotion led by IWU Chaplain Elyse Nelson Winger that focused on the drive to help others as viewed through many different traditions, and this sparked a noticeable shift in all of the ASP staff-led devotions, prayers, and evening gatherings that followed. I do not think they knew about the vast religious diversity of our group, and once Elyse conveyed that diversity, they respected the different beliefs of the members of the IWU group by focusing on



Joshua Yoo '16 (left) and Timur Chen '18

the cross-cultural values of service to others. One student from another school started off his devotion in the morning by explaining that he was sharing with us from the religious background in which he was most knowledgeable. Once Elyse acknowledged the importance of making interfaith connections, more emphasis was placed on the common values shared between traditions rather than solely those values of Christianity.

The wonderful start to the morning transitioned into a productive day at the worksite. We made significant progress on the home, with very minimal mud. We finished securing the wooden top and bottom places all around the bottom that holds the miniature wall and vinyl skirting. Attaching the long pieces of wood involved drilling upside-down underneath the house, and before we got to that point, we had to find studs along the bottom of the home to attach the board to while holding the board in place. This part of our project required the most teamwork and resulted in a lot of group bonding. We ended up working over the allotted work period because we were determined to finish installing the top plates, and screwing in the last screw of the last board was very satisfying.

To help celebrate the successful workday, we made a quick stop at a local national park for what turned out to be a 15-minute hike in the mountains since we had to make it back in time for dinner. The many streams down the mountains were running quickly due to all of the melting snow and rain over the past few days. The atmosphere was extremely peaceful and restful after a long day of work.

In the evening, Jeremy, a staff leader, shared with us some of his senior undergraduate research on the cultural implications of coal mining in Appalachia. He told us that coal mining is one of the few ways people in Appalachia can support their families, and in Appalachia coal miners are looked up to much like military veterans. Miners are seen as people who sacrificed their lives for others. Although economic and environmental issues of coal mining are extensive, there is no cut and dry solution to these problems. Additionally, one must understand that coal mining is a major part of the Appalachian culture, and to take that away from the people is to take away their identity and pride in the work they have done.

March 13

As we were faced with yet another rainy day, my group took the opportunity to volunteer at New Beginnings Learning Center in Hazard, Kentucky, where we painted the walls of a long hallway. The staff had been trying to find time to paint the hallway for more than half of a year, and they were eager to have help because they will soon have local high school students coming in to paint murals on the walls we painted. This opportunity was a wonderful chance to make connections in the community and to develop an understanding of the services this non-profit organization provides. New Beginnings Learning Center provides childcare for families that are a part of the Kentucky Transitional Assistance Program, so that their children can grow and learn in a safe environment.

Once we finished painting and the rain died down, we returned to our worksite where we cut and installed the vinyl underpinning on the two short sides of the home. While we were working, the homeowner's grandson played inside in front of the window, working very hard to hold our attention. After four hours in the rain, we placed the last corner piece on the second side. It was so nice to see the new skirting on the two sides of the home, and we wished we could have seen it completely finished. The work we did accomplish, however, was substantial, and we were happy to make significant progress on the project.

At the evening gathering, all of the different schools' groups shared their eye-opening moments of the most impact during the week. Students mentioned the impression their family's gratefulness left on them, the value of experiences had by some of the international students, the undeniable religious call to service, and strong bonds between group members. It was very moving to see how meaningful this program was to all of the students and leaders.

We then participated in one last round of IWU shout-outs where people praised the strong group dynamics, the patient teaching of others, Elyse's successful recognition of powerful interfaith connections, and impressively productive workweeks.

March 14

During the eight-hour car trip back, I discussed this article I planned to write with Assistant Professor of Nursing Wendy Kookan. She shared with me that through this trip, she saw that IWU students are curiosity driven, critical thinkers, and this trip allowed her to perceive the collective culture of IWU outside of the nursing program. IWU students sought out answers

and made sure they did things the right way. They put great thought into the jobs they did, and worked hard to do the best work they could. Although ethical challenges were faced in the trip, the students stood up for what they believed in, and started what became an outstanding interfaith discussion. Throughout the course of the week, the students made clear that doing good isn't enough; you have to do your work well.