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This Month at Illinois Wesleyan

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Rock Steady:

Students Build and Bond Through Alternative Spring Break

Story by Julia Savich '16; Photos provided by ASB students and staff

Senior physics major Julia Savich has participated in Alternative Spring Break (ASB) every year she's been a student at IWU. Following is her first-person account of this year's ASB group of 20 students and two staff members, and their work at Almost Heaven Habitat for Humanity in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia.

March 13

From only a few hours of playing cards our first night at the hotel en route to West Virginia, I could already tell the group of students this year was a great one. Everyone was eager to get to know one another, and the majority of the group stayed up late into the night talking and laughing together. Around half of the students this year were ASB returners, significantly more than previous trips, and having students who were familiar with it seemed to help the first-timers see the value of ASB and the strong friendships it can build. Furthermore, our group was very inclusive. In previous years, small groups of students signed up together and stayed together for the duration of the trip. This year, only pairs of friends signed up together, so students branched out more, rather than staying in tight circles of familiar friends.

Arriving in White Sulphur Springs around dinnertime, we received a warm greeting and briefing about the kind of work the Almost Heaven Habitat for Humanity affiliate had planned for us. We divided into two groups and assigned four members of each group to act as a group leader, a safety manager, a tool manager and a clean-up manager. Almost Heaven Habitat for Humanity was undeniably the most organized affiliate I have encountered during my four ASB trips because they knew what they wanted us to accomplish on the worksite, they designated a Habitat construction leader for each student group, and they were well prepared to house the approximately 50 students and staff from both IWU and Curry College from Milton, Massachusetts.

March 14

We started our first workday in two groups: one group installing a fence next to a finished home and the other group building the footer, or base layer, of the foundation for a new house. The fence group dug postholes, covered the posts with a vinyl cover and assembled sections of the fence.

Constructing the foundation required that we cut and build a drainage system in the bottom of a dirt pit that matched the exact dimensions of the house. Another smaller group within the foundation group worked on setting up strings around the foundation pit to use later for squaring the house. Chris Crown '17 described this side project as "measuring the square of the house to an 1/8th of an inch using prop boards, string, and a spinning laser." His group leveled the string with the spinning laser, a tool he used for research he conducted last summer through the Oklahoma Water Resource Center.

Our Habitat construction site leader, also named Chris, encouraged us to apply our previous building and leadership skills to the projects on the worksite, and he excelled at uncovering our strong suits. For instance, he noticed that I held a leadership role on the ASB trip, and that my leadership style is usually passive. When the opportunity arose, Habitat Chris put me in charge of the gravel project, urging me to take on a more active leadership role. All throughout the week, he encouraged us to try new things and learn as much about construction as possible.

Halfway through the workday, the fencing group finished their project and joined the foundation team. Together the IWU group members started to tackle the large project that was the gravel pile. In order to level the foundation of the house, we lined the bottom of the dirt pit with three inches of gravel. We divided into shovelers, bucket and wheelbarrow carriers, and spreaders. Sarah Sadowski '17 noted, "It was great seeing everyone from different backgrounds and majors working together to accomplish our common goal of preparing the house for the foundation." After three hours of moving gravel under the bright sunshine, we finished our task and ended the day with feelings of accomplishment. As Nicole Chlebek '16 put it, "We rocked it today. We had a lot of tedious measurements to make, and we hauled a lot of gravel."

The evening consisted of further reflection when we shared our insights from the day through shout-outs and "thorns and roses", otherwise known as highs and lows. Most of the shout-outs and highs of the day centered on the gravel pile, which truly brought our group together. We saw students take charge and push themselves to work as hard as they possibly could because of that enormous pile of rocks. We also realized that on this worksite, no one doubted our abilities. In previous years, we experienced slight sexism on the worksite, and we had spent the week breaking down those stereotypes. This year, however, there was no question whether or not a woman could transport as much gravel as a man, and we were all equals, proving our own abilities as we went.

March 15



Julia Savich '16



Instead of a traditional spring break, 20 students and two staff members traveled to White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia to volunteer with Habitat for Humanity.



Rosa Zapata'18 (left) and Kelsey Kujoth '16 spread gravel in the foundation pit to prepare for installation of the drainage system. (Photo by Elyse Nelson Winger).

live bluegrass and country music with local community members. The people were very welcoming and eager to show us how to dance, and we thoroughly enjoyed trying our best to follow their lead. The happiest moment of this night was when I realized that every single member of our group was out on the dance floor giving it their all. We were making up dances, teaching each other how to dance, and even getting twirled around by some of the older folks, too. The willingness of this group to jump in and try anything continually astounded me throughout the week.

March 16

We started the workday off early to get the gravel finished before the cement truck came. The truck ended up arriving half an hour early, but we finished laying down the remaining gravel while a group started spreading cement on the part that was already done. This portion of the foundation building allowed us to partner with students from Curry College. Patti Henderson, Senior Administrative Assistant to the Provost, observed “all of us were working together, making two teams become one.” With the gravel in place and the first layer of cement poured and smoothed, the bottom of the footer was complete. Habitat Chris then informed us that we moved over 30 tons of gravel in three days. We were astounded.

As part of Almost Heaven Habitat for Humanity’s spring break program, students are encouraged to work a half-day on Wednesday and use the rest of the day to explore the local area. We used the extra time to go on a bunker tour at the Greenbrier Resort, a top employer in Greenbrier County, West Virginia. The bunker was a \$300 million secret fallout shelter rented by the government for Congress from 1962 to 1992. Touring the bunker and the Greenbrier Resort sparked discussions in our group about the great disparity between the communities where we were building homes and the lavish Greenbrier Resort. We felt frustrated that hundreds of millions of dollars were poured into stocking an unused bunker for 30 years, when so many families in the U.S. and all over the world struggle to pay for food or find clean drinking water each week. This frustration intensified our determination to make progress on the worksite, and we couldn’t wait to get back.

During our group reflections at night, we shared insights uncovered as a result of going on the ASB trip. Group members delved into overcoming obstacles at the worksite, newfound desires to conserve nature, rekindling of religious beliefs, a yearning to learn about new cultures, and other fascinating topics. I was amazed at our group’s willingness to open up and share their feelings. Although this was the only formal time during the week we shared so deeply and openly, with the exception of our last reflection at a McDonald’s on the way home, we continued to explore these topics informally throughout the week, sharing our own experiences and insights.

March 17

Thursday was a bit slower, but we used the day to get to know each other, the Habitat construction leaders, and the homeowners. On the site, my small group worked on the soffeting of a house, and entered into conversation with those around us as we did so. One of the construction leaders shared his life story for half an hour while perched on the top of a ladder. He started with the difficulties of watching his wife tear her life apart with a drug addiction. He longed to help her, but only felt as though he was enabling her. After 40 years of marriage, he went to Russia to get away from the oppressive life he was living, and a dangerous helicopter ride to serene wilderness opened his eyes to the life that he was missing out on. Eventually, he turned his life around, seeking only what gave him pure happiness: God, fishing and Habitat. By the end of his story our group was in tears, and we were reminded that taking a few minutes each day to listen is incredibly important because you never know what you might hear. It may very well change your life. As Selena wisely put it, “Today was a relationship day.”

In the evening, the Curry College and IWU students hosted a community dinner where we got to know the Habitat homeowners and construction leaders better. The dinner was a perfect addition to the relationship day.

During our group reflection, we each shared words that embodied the week: empowering, nutritious, euphoria, memorable, strong, enlightening, optimistic, renewing, eye opening, invigorating, bliss, passionate, wisdom, uplifting, new, community, wonderful, laughter, fun, inspiring, happy, and diverse.

Tuesday started out a little slow because we had a team of 15 people assigned to an eight-person project. Our project was to clean off the foundation of a finished home and add grout to any places where parts of the foundation had chipped off. Another IWU group worked on installing kitchen cabinets in the same home, which involved carefully aligning the cabinets and making extra pieces to fit between the cabinets.

After a leisurely morning of sharing tools and delicately aligning cabinets, half of our group returned to the foundation project from the first day because the group from Curry College had finished leveling and raising the drainage system earlier in the morning. Now we needed to fill the pit with enough gravel to hold cement inside of the drainage system. Ultimately, we ended up lining three-fourths of the foundation pit with eight inches of gravel, but ran out of time to completely finish the job. As a result, we planned to arrive to the worksite early to finish the gravel project before the cement truck came in the late morning.

That evening we got a taste of West Virginia culture by going to the American Heritage Music Hall Inc., where we danced to



Sujit Johnston '16 (left) and David Yoon '17, part of the “roof crew,” work on soffeting. (Photo by Kelsey Kujoth'16)



