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Students Find 'Joyful Purpose' on Alternative Spring Break

March 24, 2017

Junior mathematics and religion double major Rosa Zapata is a Multifaith Ambassador, Writing Center tutor, and Argus staff member. Following is her first-person account of this year's Alternative Spring Break trip to assist the Arkansas Valley Habitat for Humanity in Fort Smith, Arkansas.

As we piled into two white vans and a black SUV for the eight-hour journey to Fort Smith, I already knew what everyone is thinking. Even though it's my second year doing Alternative Spring Break (ASB), I was thinking the same two things everyone else was: *'crap, I overpacked'* and *'why did I sign up for this?'* Of course, all 20 of us acknowledged the importance of the work we signed up to do, but it's hard to wake up early, drag more pairs of pants and pajamas than we'll need for the week across campus, and sit in a car with little legroom for eight hours. This is especially hard when all of your friends are partying on some beach in Florida. But, as an ASB veteran, I also knew that by the end of this week, we would all wish we could have stayed longer.



Students and staff pause for a group photo during a side trip to Devil's Den State Park near West Fork, Arkansas.



(from left) Rebecca Cauthorn '20, Yinze (Ricardo) Lu '20, and Paola Lehman-Cabrera '19

The first day we were greeted by Rev. Steve who showed us around St. Paul United Methodist Church, where we would stay for the week. It was a big church, complete with a gym, showers, an industrial kitchen, art rooms and the Sanctuary, a room decorated with beautiful stained-glass windows, and, most importantly, the best Wi-Fi signal in the building. When we were done with the tour, the women moved into their room and the men into theirs. After assembling the notoriously difficult cots, we shut off the lights and set our alarms for 6:30 a.m.

The church was a convenient 5-minute drive from the worksite, which, we discovered the next morning, wasn't particularly cheery-looking. It was muddy, the sky was on the cloudier side, and plywood and hammers were scattered everywhere. Stepping out of the warm cars and into the cold and wind, we met three men who were in charge of the worksite—Eddie, Hugh and Jim. Eddie is an Arkansas-native, while Jim is from Illinois and Hugh, with an accent to rival actor

Christopher Walken, is from New York. Every day, these three men would make the effort to get to know us, asking us about our majors and career plans. They even brought us hot cocoa and doughnuts.

During the week we worked from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., nailing roof panels, laying down vinyl flooring, caulking gaps in the white trim, and sawing pieces of wood and trim with extreme precision. Standing on rickety scaffolding, we installed J-Channel, which is used for trimming around windows and doors or for inside corners. It was undoubtedly hard work, but I don't think any of us really realized it. When we were working on the two houses, one almost finished and the other a mere wooden skeleton, we were, as one of our leaders, Director of Student Activities Liz Vales put it, not happy, but joyful. 'Happy' was too lukewarm, too transient. 'Joyful' was the right word to describe the laughter, smiles, and conversations we all shared.

After a few days, we met one of the home's future owners, Ruthie, and her 7-year-old daughter. Ruthie is 21 years old and had just gotten a position at a local elementary school. We cooked a stir-fry dinner for her and her daughter, and we all ate together around plastic, folding tables in the church gym. She was eager to get to know all of us, and her gratefulness couldn't have been clearer. That night, as we shared our reflections of the day, many of us said that meeting Ruthie and her daughter gave even more meaning to our work. Jill Rajarathnam '18 said that after meeting Ruthie and her daughter, she was even more dedicated to making the house as perfect as possible for the future occupants.

Now, as I said before, I knew that going on this trip would bring us all fulfillment and joy. But this trip surprised me in a way I never expected. Since last year's presidential election, I have grown considerably pessimistic. Our group was very diverse, composed of international students, African-American students and Hispanic students. Honestly, I was wary of how people in the South would treat us. But as the days passed, that wariness disappeared. We were given a hot meal almost every day, thanks to the numerous groups of volunteers who took time out of their schedules to cook for a group of strangers. We even had a group of girls called the Dandies perform a spectacular rodeo show just for us. Every single person we met in Arkansas was overflowing with kindness and generosity.

Our return to Bloomington was bittersweet. We were all sad to leave such a beautiful and welcoming place, but we were also thankful for having had this experience together. The grins on our faces showed that. Next year, as I'm standing in line to toss my luggage into a van, I will probably ask myself why I signed up for ASB again—old habits die hard. But I won't forget the feelings of purpose and glee that develop throughout the week of building homes, connecting with strangers and helping families in need.



(from left) Yinze (Ricardo) Lu '20, Paola Lehman-Cabrera '19 and Paula Amat-Norman '19

Story by Rosa Zapata '18; Photos by Ziyang Liu '19