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An Alternative Spring Break: The Forgotten Gulf Coast

A first-person report by:

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While our friends were tanning on the beach in Miami during spring break, we ventured on Illinois Wesleyan University's first

Alternative Spring Break trip to spend a week in the Hurricane Katrina devastated community, Pascagoula, Mississippi. Students, freshmen Jamie Stroleny (Education), Sara Laney (Sociology), Sophomore Jennifer Poliwka (Nursing), and Senior Brenden Sullivan (History) were mudding walls, hanging drywall, and keeping our eyes peeled for deadly spiders. It may not sound like the ideal spring break, but it was. With humor, creativity, and planning we had a great time helping the citizens of the forgotten Gulf Coast with Hurricane Katrina rebuilding.

We arrived at our destination at 6am in the morning and joined dozens of volunteers from around the country, including Kansas City, University of Illinois, Franklin Pierce College, and South Birmingham. Each day was a surprise. Each day was an adventure. And each day was a learning experience that helped us grow closer to the people and environment of Mississippi.

For two days of the trip, we helped a man named Kermit, whose house had been struck by a tornado that spun off when Hurricane Katrina touched land. We spent the two days picking up debris that was deposited throughout his yard. We learned how to hang drywall and put up ceilings in three rooms. We also sorted through piles of wood, saving every scrap that could be reused. Kermit was running low on money after his insurance company told him that they would not give him any money to rebuild. He had to work with what he had—a house that had been picked up into the air and rotated almost 180 degrees before crashing back down to the ground. Using their bare hands, Kermit and his son rotated the house into its original position. Even with their best attempts the house still was not completely level. The walls weren't even with what should have been the ceiling, there was no furniture in the house, and mold had started to grow. However, through it all Kermit and his family kept faith, symbolized by crosses that were hung in each room of the house.

Other projects through out the week included insulating a ceiling, putting up light fixtures and vents, and cleaning up a back yard which, unfortunately, was full of dog poop. We helped at a home of a family that was expecting the arrival of a new baby in only 3 weeks and at a nursing home anxious to re-open. We worked in Operation TLC's warehouse and, while avoiding spiders, we reorganized donated furniture and paint, all of which would be given to the residents of Pascagoula for free.

One night, the founders of Operation TLC, the volunteer organization that housed, fed and provided us projects, drove it home why we came. Though Tammy and Annie's paths crossed for only three days while working for the American Red Cross, these women recognized a need for refrigerators and stoves for hurricane victims. Due to the devastation these two women moved to Mississippi, and created the organization Mississippi Home Again, which provides the most fundamental, most costly household essentials. They explained to us that the need for volunteers is extremely great in Mississippi, but the majority of the country does not realize this need. Mississippi is the poorest state in the nation and Jackson County, where we worked, is the poorest county in the poorest state. Help is needed at a critical level, as proven by the current suicide rate for the community, which has increased in this area by about 900%. Due to the need for dire help in Mississippi Tammy and Annie created a volunteer organization that would offer housing, food and projects for people who are able to help those in Mississippi, and hence Operation TLC. Operation TLC was staffed by volunteers from the Americorps organization. Although relatively unknown to us prior to our trip, Americorps provides a great deal of service to the American people. For 10 months these 18-24 year olds donate their time, helping people to put their lives together. The Americorp volunteers at Operation TLC coordinated the volunteers, project sites, tools, and housing. Their volunteer efforts helped to provide us with an outstanding experience.

We headed down to Mississippi with the apprehensions that one would have about spending a week in a natural disaster area. Through our experiences we learned of the devastation that still exists for so many residents. We were able to provide a small sliver of hope to people who were hopeless and while we were able to create a positive impact for the Jackson County community, they left a much larger impact on our lives. By weeks end we agreed that it was us who had benefited the most from a journey to the forgotten Gulf Coast. We have arrived back to the Illinois Wesleyan University campus as different people. Our vision of the world has been changed; we are more aware of the world around us and more aware of our ability to make a difference in the world.



From left: Jenny Poliwka '09, Sara Laney '10, Jamie Stroleny '10 and Brendan Sullivan '07