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Students Volunteer in Louisiana During Alternative Spring Break

March 22, 2019

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — Embodying the spirit of philanthropy and exploration, some Illinois Wesleyan University students spent their Spring Break together volunteering with Habitat for Humanity in Mandeville, Louisiana.

The following is a student blog written by Teagan Potter '19 (Edwardsville, Ill.), who shares her firsthand experience as a member of IWU's Alternative Spring Break program.

Illinois Wesleyan Alternative Spring Break (ASB) students worked on Habitat for Humanity houses in Mandeville, Louisiana.

Day 1 (March 9): The Long Road Ahead

Paula Amat-Norman '19 — "I'm really excited for my third ASB trip! Although the trip is exhausting, you come back inspired, refreshed, and ready to finish the semester strong."

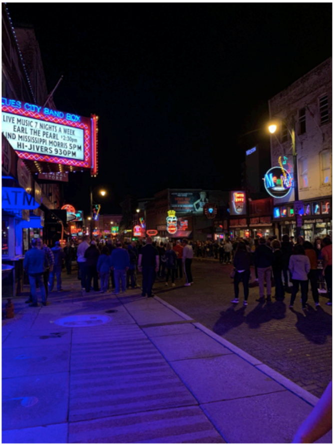
With clothes smashed into overfilled duffel bags and an extra pillow to counteract the overwhelming feeling of tiredness tucked under my arm, my roommate, Amy, and I drove to campus to meet up with the Alternative Spring Break vans at 8:30 a.m. Naturally, as a college senior more than halfway through the semester, I was exhausted and had more than a little trouble waking up so early on the Saturday to begin Spring Break. Nevertheless, 20 other ASBers, our two staff members, University Chaplain Elyse Nelson-Winger and Senior Web Developer Michael Gorman '10, and I made it on time to our caravan. Like a game of Tetris, we arranged and rearranged suitcases and duffel bags to fit perfectly before embarking on the journey ahead.

Before our departure, the leaders chose a name for each van. At 9 a.m. sharp, the "Party Bus," "Rev Rev Reverend," and "Van Force 1" pulled out of the Hansen Student Center parking lot to hit the road. It was a common occurrence on our trip to make everything into a competition between the vans; the van drivers would consistently walkie talkie back and forth to say that their van was ready first, their van arrived at the destination first, etc. — anything to pass the time of the drive quicker.

ASB students and staff volunteers enjoyed dinner at the Blues City Cafe in Memphis.

With only a few rest stops along the way, the "Party Bus" (the van I rode with eight other people) finally arrived in Memphis, Tennessee around 5 p.m. We quickly unloaded and claimed beds in the hotel room just to meet back in the hotel lobby at 5:30 p.m. to leave for dinner. The ASBers are only staying in Memphis for the night, so naturally, we had to eat dinner on Beale Street, the most famous street in the city. Near the end of the street, we were quickly surrounded by the aroma of sweet southern BBQ coming from the Blues City Cafe. All 23 of us scrambled in to appease our rumbling stomachs.

Inside, the restaurant resembled an old timey diner complete with neon signs and white vinyl tables. Conversation was slow as each of us simply could not wait to dive into some true southern BBQ. As a group, we had a choice of catfish, chicken tenders, or ribs. Personally, I chose the ribs, and I think I can speak for the rest of the group in saying that we were not disappointed. Each plate came out of the kitchen stacked high with food, but I don't think a single bit of food was left when we left.



ASB students explored Beale Street in Memphis.

With full stomachs and a sense of wonder, we left the restaurant to have some free time in the city. I split off in a group with three other people and quickly discovered a stop for Lime scooters. In an attempt to see the city in a new way, the four of us quickly climbed on and scooted around Memphis. The entire night was filled with laughter, and each of us said we couldn't think of a better way to begin our spring break.

Soon enough, our night in the city came to an end. A few of the ASBers were a bit more adventurous than I was and combined all of their sheets and pillows to make a giant pillow fort in an ASBer's hotel room. I, on the other hand, quickly snuggled up in my bed to get a good night's rest for the day ahead.

Day 2 (March 10): Spring Forward

In an already jam-packed spring break trip, it is difficult to get enough sleep, but daylight savings time made this trip a bit harder. We groggily got up and packed up our stuff to take down to a hotel breakfast. When 8:30 a.m. rolled around, we were ready to get on the road again. However, this time, our first stop was local.

Our vans pulled into the Lorraine Motel which looked strikingly the same as it did in the 60's. Although the Lorraine will be permanently etched in history as the place where Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968, it was not always the Lorraine. Before, it had several different names and functions, but, most famously, it was the Marquette Hotel that was the only hotel to serve black clientele in the area. By the time the building was named the Lorraine, it had become a destination for famous African Americans such as Louis Armstrong, Nat King Cole, and of course, Martin Luther King, Jr.

As the ASBers walked into the building, it was as if time stood still. Old cars are parked outside and the exterior of the building is painted the famous teal color of the time. However, stepping in, we realized that the entirety of the Lorraine was renovated. The interior is home to the National Civil Rights Museum. This museum gave one of the most comprehensive civil rights histories that I had ever seen. Beginning with the slave trade, the museum took us through hundreds of years of history including the path to having a black president, the Montgomery bus boycott and its repercussions, and more. However, the most interesting, yet saddening, aspect of this museum was at the end. Although, all of the rooms of the Lorraine are renovated into space for the museum, one particular room stands untouched: Dr. King's room. As the ASBers finished the museum, we stood feet from where Dr. King stood before he was assassinated. The entire experience was chilling.

ASB students walked through the National Civil Rights Museum.

A more recent addition to the museum was a small building across the street. This building moved on from historical civil rights movements and touched on the immigration troubles that America is experiencing right now. Walking through, I felt as if I was actually part of history in the making. Finally, the museum finished with conspiracy theories about the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Not only did the museum go through every possible theory the FBI has but it also showed the room where James Earl Ray supposedly stood to take his shot at Dr. King. If I thought the other part of the museum was chilling, it had nothing on this spot.

At noon, it was time to get on the road again, so we had to abandon our thoughts of the museum for the time being. With a quick Jimmy John's lunch, our group was ready for the final stretch to Louisiana.

Arriving around 7 p.m., our group finally made it to Slidell, Louisiana. We pulled up to a small church called the Peace Lutheran Church and Mission Center for a pizza dinner and a group meeting. Here, we met Pastor Barb for the first time. This woman was one of the most welcoming and kind people I have ever met, but my favorite thing about her is that she says what she thinks. Even after only being in the mission center for about 10 minutes, she said, “That’s the problem with me. I don’t know when to be quiet,” with an uproarious laugh. She thanked us immensely for helping to volunteer and began to tell us just how much it means to the area. She explained that after Katrina, her church had raised enough money to build a brand new church, but that church would have taken a few years to construct. Instead, the church decided to purchase the old, worn down church they currently own in order to bring in volunteers the very next week. Since then, Barb has hosted thousands of volunteers. Incredible, right? Well, Barb also enlightened us that this church is the only Lutheran church in Louisiana that recognizes LGBTQ+ rights. While this recognition has led to the loss of a lot of financial help, Barb remains firm in her decision and is advocating for the rest of the Louisiana Lutheran community to do the same. It’s a long road but an important one.

ASB students arrived at the Peace Lutheran Church and Mission Center in Slidell, Louisiana.

Finally, we finished up the night with another introduction of everyone because after almost two days together, we still didn’t know everyone’s names. Here, we discussed our expectations for living together and called it a night. However, my room of five girls found themselves way too excited to sleep, so we stayed up chatting until way past midnight.

Day 3 (March 11): The Work Begins

Jonathan Panton ’21 — “This trip truly shows us that giving is good!”

A common theme for this trip seems to be being tired. Yet again, we woke up with little sleep under our belts, rolled out of bed, and headed over to the building out back to make sack lunches and eat breakfast. Although everyone was ecstatic to begin work on the Habitat for Humanity homes, it didn’t quite show at 7:45 in the morning, but nonetheless, we were all packed and ready by 8 a.m. We loaded the buses and rolled out to the Habitat ReStore, a resale store that gives most of its profits to building new Habitat homes. Here, we all piled into the conference room to hear an orientation from Katie, one of the St. Tammany Habitat directors.

ASB students learned about Habitat for Humanity.

She began the orientation with a video of families saying how much their home means to them. Commonly, we heard that the house brings them safety and happiness. Many of us didn’t realize how fortunate we are to have four walls with a door that locks. After the video, Katie explained more about Habitat. One of the greatest accomplishments she stated was that this affiliate builds 10-15 houses a year, making it a successful and booming affiliate. Katie also explained what Habitat entails. For those who were unfamiliar, Habitat is for people who need a hand up, not a hand out. In other words, Habitat homes are not given away. The families put in hours upon hours of work to make up for their sweat equity, or hours of sweat put into a home. Overall, a family needs to put in 300 hours of sweat equity into their home. Additionally, the homebuyer needs to attend financial training classes in order to learn how to manage and save their money. Basically, the whole purpose of this process is to get the family into a place where they will eventually be financially secure on their own. The process of buying a Habitat home takes about two years. When the house is done, Habitat sells the homebuyer the house based on the buyer's income and what they can afford. Therefore, the homes are sold for slightly less than what they are worth. The fundraising that Habitat does and the profits from the ReStore help to counteract this loss in order to build more homes. Overall, the whole process is all about the homebuyer from the beginning to the end.

The more we heard, the more excited we were to get started, and finally, we were on the buses midmorning to our site. We showed up to a block of houses in Covington, Louisiana. Here, there were four houses in a row: one that only had the foundation laid, one that looked to be about halfway done, a finished house, and one house that was only a few steps away from being available to buy. As we got out of the vans, we were greeted by our construction managers who quickly proved to be some of the nicest and patient people we have ever worked with.

ASB student arrived on the job site.

Although it was our first work day, there was no hesitation in divvying up the tasks. A large group headed to the first house to start building the first floor of the home. My group split off at the second house to start hand painting the siding a pretty grayish blue. You would think painting would be simple and easy, but it actually took all day just to paint the first coat of the siding. At 3:30, both groups were exhausted (no surprise there) from working all day in the hot, humid Louisiana weather.

Today, we just headed straight back to the mission center where Barb was already cooking a delicious dinner for us of pork chops, red beans, and rice. The group was astounded at her amazing cooking, and we are all so thankful to have meals prepared for us after a long day. On a Habitat service trip like ASB, prepared meals are typically never expected, so this was a nice surprise.

After dinner, it was my group's turn to help with dishes. Of course, the dishwasher was not working, so we spent probably over an hour handwashing huge pots and pans in a sink that was too small. Although we probably got more water on us than on the dishes, we finished and headed back to the main building for a meeting with the group.

Here, we went around the circle giving shout-outs to someone on the trip who did something helpful. After, we each said our highs and lows for the trip so far. Many highs were seeing the progress that could be made after just one day. I think the whole group felt euphoria after stepping back from their work today. However, the lows were commonly the National Civil Rights Museum. The group as a whole felt as if there is still so much work to be done within civil rights, yet, we were all delighted to see the progress the country has made thus far. From there, we spoke of the changes that we, as a group, could enact on

ASB students began painting one of the Habitat for Humanity houses.

communities to change the world.

Leaving the meeting on a heavy note, the ASBers decided to take advantage of the fire pit behind the building. Here we snuggled in together to roast marshmallows and tell ghost stories. Although we were open to more general ghost stories, the more exciting ones had to do with IWU. Whether we chose to believe the stories or not, it was fun to bond over a bonfire before heading to bed.

Day 4 (March 12): Another Work Day by the Bayou

Andrew Coop '19 — "One beautiful sunset, zero alligator attacks."

Bright and early, we began another day of work. The ASBers picked up right where they left off; some worked on finishing the first floor, some worked on the inside of the second house, and others (like me) continued with the siding and the trim on the outside of the second house.

ASB students and staff volunteers on the job site.

We worked all day long, but our spirits remained high. I don't remember a time when someone wasn't laughing or dancing along to music while he or she worked. Progress was quickly being made and we were all proud of it.

The day ended at 3:30 like usual (my house finished the second coat of blue paint and almost finished the first coat of trim) and we all quickly changed to head over to our Bayou Adventure in Slidell. Here, the ASBers first had dinner. We had all of the Louisiana favorites: jambalaya, gator, and crawfish pie. I was proud of our group of adventurous eaters who tried everything! Personally, there wasn't a bad dish on the table, but my Midwestern taste buds found all of the food pretty darn spicy!

ASB students and staff volunteers experienced a kayak trip.

After yet another delicious dinner, we geared up in kayaks to head out to the bayou. For 45 minutes, we had to paddle to Lake Pontchartrain to catch the sunset. Some of the group rocketed ahead while a few remained in the back caught in trees and grass. Once we tackled the learning curve, kayaking became peaceful. The slow moving water left us bobbing slightly, a relaxing way to end a full work day. Along the way to the lake, we saw an alligator (much smaller than we imagined!) and an osprey nest. However, the most exciting part of the entire kayaking trip was coming out onto the lake right at sunset. There was a patch of dry land where we could stand, rest, and enjoy the day coming to a close. While we mosied on the way to the lake, we rushed on the way back because our headlamps attracted swarms of bugs. However, the lights did give the bayou a spooky half-illuminated look that led to an exciting trip back.

The sun set on the ASB kayak trip.

Arriving at the entrance, we thanked our tour guides and slopped into the vans with our wet clothes and shoes. However, our day was far from done. On the way back home, we stopped at the Slidell Old Towne Soda Shop for a little taste of some handmade ice cream. Although we were shivering in our wet clothes in the nighttime weather, we couldn't resist the tasty ice cream. The shop itself made the whole experience better. Surrounding us on all of the walls was a humongous collection of ice cream scoops. We spent a lot of time just admiring them. Who knew they made so many ice cream scoops?

Finally, our group headed back to the mission center to shower and sleep off the tiring day we left behind. Still, everyone went to sleep with smiles on their faces ready to begin work the next day.

Day 5 (March 13): NOLA Here We Come

Deonta Mitchell '22 — "It was a great experience to be able to have people from IWU come to my hometown and experience my lifestyle and be able to see my story and be able to give them a better experience trying different southern cultures – from eating gator, to beignets, to walking down Bourbon Street. They made the experience better for me, and I'm glad I grew amazing bonds with everyone."

Sara Dust '19 — "It was really cool to get to experience New Orleans with a few students from there! I loved getting to form amazing bonds with new friends in a beautiful city"

Today was half work day. However, the groups were split a little differently today. Eight of the ASBers headed to a completely different site to start work on the finishing touches of a house. The very last step was to build a fence, but according to them, it was much easier said than done. Between the eight of them, they moved four tons of concrete throughout the morning. They all came back sweaty and sunburnt from the day. The rest of us continued our project from yesterday. The flooring group finished and moved on to building the exterior of the walls of the home. The indoor group began painting the inside trim, and my group dwindled down to three people and we started the second coat of trim. Additionally, the construction managers tacked on the task of painting the gable of the house. As a person not too fond of heights, this was a big achievement for me. I had to set up the extension ladder to reach the top of the gable, but by the end of the morning, I had finished the accent gray color and the trim surrounding it. Although we were only on-site for the first half of the day, the house visibly progressed which just gave us more motivation to work hard tomorrow.

Today was especially rewarding because as we were leaving, we met two of the homeowners on the block. As one of the painters of the group, I found it incredibly interesting that each homeowner was the most excited about the paint color of their home. Apparently, each homeowner spent a lot of time and energy picking the color and accent color of each home to make it stand out on the block. The homeowner of one of the light blue houses on the end even said that he didn't pick an accent color because he wanted his house to be different than all of the others on the block. Despite the paint color differences, both homeowners came together to express their gratitude for their brand new home. This meeting reassured all of us that we were doing amazing work.

ASB students at the job site.

ASB students and staff volunteers explored New Orleans.

Our day was cut short because we made a group trip to New Orleans about an hour away. When we got to the city, we had to commend the "Party Bus" driver, Ryan, because he somehow made it into the only available space in the parking lot with a big 10-seater van. We met up with the other two vans to receive our tram passes. At this point, the ASBers split into three different groups: the French Quarter tour, the WWII Museum, and the ghost tour. While I spoke to members of all of the groups about their experiences, I personally chose the ghost tour.

This tour began at the Lafayette Cemetery Number 1 and continued throughout the Garden District. I don't want to reveal and spoil any of the spooky tales throughout the tour, but I will say that it was a surreal feeling to be in a city with so much history surrounding death. While it is not a particularly joyful topic, our tour led us through cemeteries, on historic streets, and through a district containing historic mansions. Through this tour, our guide revealed the tragic history of New Orleans and its treatment of slaves and Irishmen. For the history buff, this tour was the perfect combination of thrilling stories and true historical background. For the movie buff, this tour also would have been great, as it led through neighborhoods containing the houses of Sandra Bullock and John Goodman as well as the house used for American Horror Story: Coven.

After a few hours, however, the tour had to come to an end, but we were all hungry from the long day, so we weren't complaining. Hopping on the tram again, we met up with the other two ASB groups to eat at Superior Seafood, a famous New Orleans restaurant. Once again, we were greeted with amazingly delicious food and good company.

Still, our day was not over. After dinner, we had an hour or so of free time to wander around the city. In a group with two of my friends, Andrew and Sara, we walked up and down Bourbon Street to see the nightlife that everyone raves about. Every block or so, we found street performers or people in costume, and even though Mardi Gras ended about a week ago, we still found people throwing beads and dressed in purple, green, and gold. Bourbon Street was like a scene out of a movie.

Surprise ... we were all exhausted yet again. A quiet drive back to Slidell completed our day and almost everyone ran straight to bed.

Day 6 (March 14): Happy Pi (King Cake) Day!

Ziyan "Sevyn" Liu '19 — "New Orleans and Louisiana are beautiful places where we left our memories, hard work, and joy. ASB will never let you down!"

ASB students and staff worked on framing walls.

Today was yet another productive day, but it was especially rewarding for my trim team and me. We FINALLY finished painting the siding, trim, and accent on the outside of house number two. I was beyond excited to finally put my paintbrush down and exchange it for the nail gun as the very first exterior wall went up into place on the first house. For some reason, Joey handed the nail gun directly to me despite my very minimal experience, and I was the one who secured the very first wall of the house! Obviously, this project became incredibly exciting because I was finally part of the team that actually got to build the house from the ground up!

While the larger group was working on the wall project, a smaller group headed over to the other site to continue work on the fence. The fence project was incredibly difficult, and by the end of the day, the group had only placed about 15 feet of fence down. Obviously, this got us all thinking about the amount of work that goes into something that seems so 'simple.'

One of the nicest parts about the day was a visit from Katie. In honor of Pi Day, she wanted to bring us a pie but didn't like the way it looked at the store, so instead, she brought us a King Cake, a Mardi Gras tradition. Technically, we aren't supposed to have King Cake after Mardi Gras, but she let the rules bend a bit in order for us to give it a taste. Part of the tradition includes hiding a plastic baby in the cake and whoever gets the slice with the baby gets good luck!

ASB students listened to the mayor and city planner speak in the Dew Drop Jazz Hall in Mandeville, Louisiana.

3:30 came at a bit of a surprise. As we were cleaning up our tools and finishing up our work for the day, Elyse told us that we would get to meet the mayor and the city planner to learn more about the housing in the area! We gathered up all of our things and headed to the Dew Drop Jazz Hall in Mandeville, Louisiana.

All of us were shocked when we finally arrived at the Dew Drop because, from the outside, it looked to be a little wooden shack. However, when we went inside, it was a small concert hall complete with benches and a stage. Upon entering, we were told that the Dew Drop is the oldest, unaltered jazz hall in the country. At one point in time, anyone who was anybody in the jazz world played at the Dew Drop. It was amazing to be in the same place as some of the most famous jazz players in history.

Here, we met with the mayor and city planner who spoke to us a bit about Mandeville and answered any specific housing questions we had. The mayor even invited us to breakfast the next morning! It's not every day that you get to have breakfast with the mayor!

After our Dew Drop meeting, we went back to the mission center to have a delicious dinner prepared by Pastor Barb. Today, we had her homemade spaghetti. Not a single bit of food was left over, and we all left the dinner hall with big smiles on our faces.

To finish up our night, we had a big group meeting where we shared our honest thoughts about the trip. Many of us thought that the trip was an amazing bonding experience, but still, some of the group found the group to be a little separated. Before parting with those thoughts, we made it a mission as a group to work with someone new the following day and to create more cohesion within the group. As we went to bed, all of us were reflecting a bit on the trip as a whole and were sharing how bittersweet it felt to finish up our work.

Day 7 (March 15): Our Final Work Day

Amy Clapp '19 — "it was one heck of a good time!"

Today was even more tiring than the typical work day because we were up and ready by 7:45 a.m. to meet the mayor at Cafe Du Monde, a famous chain, for beignets in the morning. Surrounded by good conversation, we were not totally aware of the downpour of rain outside. After awhile, we heard the news that we weren't going to make it to the site this morning. Instead, however, we would be volunteering in the ReStore.

At the ReStore, we were astounded by the amount of help they needed despite the incredible organization the store already had. We split off into about 10 to 12 different groups, each tackling smaller tasks. My group had the overwhelming task of organizing and sorting bins upon bins of hangers. Although it seems menial, the warehouse workers made several comments about how big of a help it was to have us sort through all of the bins. It took all morning, but we finally finished all 10 or so bins filled with hangers. Once again, we were hit with a huge sense of accomplishment as we could visibly see our progress from the morning.

By afternoon, we were able to go back to the site one last time. However, instead of splitting up into different groups, we all were able to work together on creating the exterior and interior walls. The "trained" group that had been working on the walls since day one trained and supervised us newbies on hammering and nailing. As a large group, we started with one wall done, but by the end of the day, we had hammered together every single wall of the home. I can't think of a better way to end our time here in Louisiana!

ASB students and staff volunteers took a group photo on the final work day.

As one last hoorah, we had Barb's final dinner of the trip of homemade chicken pot pie. We were so excited to be all together that some of us had to be basically kicked out of the dinner hall in order to stop our conversation. As a group, we had one last meeting discussing the trip as a whole. Additionally, we challenged each and every ASBer to say someone new he or she worked with and something he or she learned about the new person. Everyone was ecstatic to share about their new friends throughout the day.

ASB students completed their work on the final day.

While we were all exhausted from a full week of work and lack of sleep, most of the group stayed up extra late to get in some final time together before the trip ended. At the beginning of the week, we picked names out of a bag. These names were our "secret buddies" for the week. Throughout the week, we were supposed to get to know our secret buddy better and, by the end of the week, we were supposed to gather supplies from the work site (such as miscut wood, bent nails, paint, etc.) to create some type of gift for our secret buddy. In the typical college student fashion, we stayed up late to finish the gifts we procrastinated so heavily on throughout the week. On the drive home, during our lunch stop, we planned to reveal our secret buddy gifts as one last bonding event.

Day 8 (March 16): Taking the Long Way Home

Ryan Ozelie '19 — "Party Bus can't stop, won't stop."

Before the crack of dawn, our van caravan was already on the road. Although we were definitely not supposed to (sorry Elyse!) the Party Bus made a quick (8 minutes — we timed it!) stop at McDonald's for an early morning breakfast and coffee run. Luckily we did because that stop kept us going all day long.

Off and on, our bus was filled with sleeping, jamming out to music, and playing road trip games to pass the time of the 12-ish hour drive. Although we were all sad about leaving the community we fell in love with in Louisiana, we were all champing at the bit to get home for a day of rest before classes started again.

Our only major stop of the day was our lunchtime secret buddy stop. While we do this tradition every year, I have yet to see such a sentimental group of gifts. Every ASBer took on the challenge of getting to know their secret buddy in order to incorporate special memories within the gifts. It was wonderful to end an amazing trip on such a high note.

ASB students exchanged gifts created from spare job site materials to commemorate the trip.

Then, of course, the competition began for the vans to make it back to IWU (The Party Bus made it back first, but who's counting?) to disperse our separate ways until we meet back up for an ASB get-together at Elyse's house…. and that ends another successful Alternative Spring Break!

By Teagan Potter '19