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Megan Baker
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Students Support Families in Need During Alternative Spring Break

May 8, 2020

Editor’s Note: This year’s group of Alternative Spring Break volunteers departed prior to travel restrictions enacted in response to COVID-19.

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — Embodying the spirit of philanthropy, a group of Illinois Wesleyan University students opted for an Alternative Spring Break trip by volunteering with Habitat for Humanity in Avery County, North Carolina.

Through Habitat for Humanity’s Collegiate Challenge Program, thousands of students from colleges and universities across the country spent a week building and repairing homes in urban and rural locations. Illinois Wesleyan’s group of volunteers — organized by the Office of Multifaith Engagement — worked in Avery County from March 7-14.

"Alternative Spring Break is an opportunity to step outside the familiar and put our energy to supporting others," said Coordinator of Multifaith Engagement Stuart Haruyama.

Nursing major and advocacy minor Wah Chook '22 added, “Service to others is one of my top values, and this trip embodies that in the sense that I am serving the community we are in. It also helps me evaluate what’s the most effective and impactful way to serve others.”

For English writing major Jon Recchia '20, the major highlight of the trip “was the volunteer work we did for Habitat for Humanity. I really enjoyed working with my hands, and seeing progress done on a house for a family in need was super cool.”

During their time in Avery County, the group of students worked on two new homes for families in need.

“From digging septic systems to assembling cabinets, it was amazing to see how much we could build in five days,” Haruyama said. “Driving home we were all tired, yet the group also seemed energized by the bonds of new relationships and its accomplishments over the week.”

In addition to their volunteer work, the students had many opportunities to explore the local community and the natural wonders of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

“For most of our students, the Blue Ridge Mountains were an entirely new part of the country to visit,” remarked Haruyama.

Some activities the students enjoyed included hiking up Grandfather Mountain, going caving, visiting waterfalls, and playing games like Telephone Pictionary.

“I went caving for the first time,” Chook said. “I didn’t even know what caving was. I even took the challenge to army-crawl out of a small hole in complete darkness — like complete darkness. I’ve never been on top of a mountain before, and the view was just spectacular.”



Illinois Wesleyan students volunteered with Habitat for Humanity in Avery County, North Carolina during Alternative Spring Break.



Illinois Wesleyan Alternative Spring Break volunteers explored the Blue Ridge Mountains during their trip to North Carolina.

While Avery County is home to many natural wonders and places to explore, “amidst scenic natural beauty is what locals describe as ‘invisible poverty,’” explained Haruyama.

For Recchia, the Alternative Spring Break was an opportunity to make a difference for the Avery County community and support causes he cares about.

“It is my firm belief that no one should be homeless, and we need to make major strides as a country to fight the issue,” explained Recchia. “The notion of finding fixes to alarming international issues including large-scale destruction of nature and climate change, lack of adequate education, and global poverty seems to be an insurmountable feat. However, radical change starts with a single person deciding to take a stand, and there is an abundance of inspiring people out there committing their lives to make a positive impact on our planet. I aspire to be one of those individuals, and this volunteer opportunity was a step in that direction.”

Through their week of volunteer work and exploration, the group of students developed personal bonds that they say were a highlight of the trip.

“I picked up additional teamwork skills that I’ll take with me in the future,” said Recchia. “It was a large group of students from various backgrounds with different skills, so completing tasks was challenging at first, but got easier as we got used to each other.”

“It’s not very often we can get to know someone by doing service together. I think the connection that you make with people on the trip is super awesome,” said Chook. “IWU is all about the relationships and the trip is just that. You get to engage and develop genuine relationships while learning and developing yourself as a person.”

Illinois Wesleyan greatly values civic engagement. Former IWU president Minor Myers jr. famously said, “Go forth and do well. But, more importantly, go forth and do good.”

“This trip immerses students into service and teaches them the value of service” reflected Chook.

“Alternative Spring Break embodies IWU's value of generosity,” added Recchia. “Throughout my four years at Wesleyan, I have noticed that students, staff, and professors have large and giving hearts, so it makes sense that such a large group of students were so gung-ho about this opportunity.”

For more information about IWU’s annual Alternative Spring Break, please visit:

<https://www.iwu.edu/action/alternative-breaks.html>.



Illinois Wesleyan Alternative Spring Break volunteers went "caving" during their trip to North Carolina.