

Campus Connection

ST. MARY STUDENT PARISH AND FR. GABRIEL RICHARD NEWMAN CENTER ■ SPRING 2010

Alternative Spring Break

New learning experiences, different challenges, feelings of fulfillment

By Jessica Kopicki ('10 BSN)

After three Alternative Spring Break (ASB) trips of my own, one as a site leader and two as a participant, I was ready for a new ASB challenge. As a senior, I look back at my first encounter with this program when I was a freshman. From the first moment I heard about spending a week serving others, I felt called to get involved. I emailed the student coordinator with some pretty basic questions; would I like the trip, what could I expect, etc. I wanted to hear that people who participate have a good time, and I wanted to meet some new friends through St. Mary. I had no idea what I was in for, and I definitely was not expecting to have my life change so drastically.

Upon returning to school after my freshman trip to Nashville, Tennessee, I could not wait for the following year. During that week, our group helped African refugees resettle in Nashville. Sophomore year a new group worked in a soup kitchen, helped ex-convicts write resumes, and spent time at a home for people with disabilities in Baltimore, Maryland. During my junior year our group helped repair homes for the elderly in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina. Each of these trips brought new learning experiences, different challenges, and a diverse group of people that I would call my family. Including myself, each group had twelve students, and each time, I came back to Ann Arbor after ASB with eleven new best friends.

Not only did I become close friends with my group members during the week of service, but the meetings in the five weeks leading up to Spring Break really set a solid foundation for the work ahead of us. It is very difficult to describe the feeling of walking into a meeting of close to 100 other students who, like you, are devoted and dedicated to serving those in need. During the preparation meetings we discussed the topics each of the groups would be facing, whether it be urban poverty, rural poverty, and Hurricane Katrina relief. This program provides education to students outside of the scope of just one project. As I participated in these meetings for three years, I watched as three different students worked with Fr. Dan Reim, S.J. to coordinate the program. On my way back from South Carolina last year, I knew I wanted that job this year.

Immediately upon my return from South Carolina, I started asking Fr. Dan about the position. After talking with him, I was excited to take on a new ASB role. Starting with the preliminary work over the summer, and moving through to welcome picnics, information meetings, expanding to two new sites, the site



leader and participant applications processes, and group meetings, I was able to see a new side of the program. I have enjoyed my time working with Fr. Dan, our wonderful group of sixteen site leaders, and the amazing participants. Although I did not participate in a service trip this year, I have a different feeling of fulfillment. Hearing the stories from those who served brings a smile to my face and happiness to my heart.

I have never experienced anything like this fabulous program that is continuously growing at St. Mary. I would like to say thank you to all of those who support these trips, all of your prayers and donations make all of this possible. I can only hope that I have made even a small impact on this program, because it has definitely made one on me.



Serving God by serving others: Alternative Spring Break (ASB)

In March, 96 students from St. Mary Student Parish—the largest group ever—traveled to eight sites in the US for a week of service



To serve without reward

Mount Pleasant, S. Carolina

Mary Walle ('13 BGS)

Return to humanity the dignity it deserves.

Brother Dennis, the priest in charge of the Catholic Parish in Charleston, West Virginia, presented this challenge. Over one week in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina 12 students worked to return some of that dignity to the McNeil family. We worked together to make their home safe, warm, and dry. The MacNeil's are an elderly couple who could no longer maintain the home they had built with their own hands. During the week some replaced a floor, some re-sided the house, others painted and caulked. Each person has a different story to tell, this is mine.

College is stressful. It's busy, busy, busy, go, go, go all the time. Sometimes I need to breathe. Step back. Look at my life. Where have I come from? Where am I going? And where is God in my life? Often this question is pushed to the background. When there are dozens of pages of papers to be written, hundreds to be read, tests to be studied for, trying to see a friend now and then, making time for God seems almost impossible. But when I do turn to God, my life goes so much smoother. I find peace.

In South Carolina I found that peace, the calm, that rock in my soul that had been shaken by months of being overworked and not living with Christ at the center of my life. I found peace in the people I worked with and the people I met,



in serving others, putting other people before myself. I saw peace in the eyes of Mr. MacNeil. In the calm, gentle way he had of watching us do the work he was no longer able to do himself. Silently, and sometimes vocally, giving thanks to us, but most importantly to God.

To find this deep, all consuming peace I first had to remember and re-learn to trust. Always an integral part of my faith, my trust in God and in other people has recently been shaken. Working with and sharing my faith story and listening and learning from the stories of my team, I have begun to restore that trust. Their stories and support will always inspire me. I also witnessed the impenetrable trust in God of Mrs. MacNeil. A woman whose home was being eaten by termites, who had no doubt endured hardships I could not understand, Mrs. MacNeil still praised, thanked, and trusted in God.

To Serve without Reward. Without asking or wanting it. That is the challenge of the Christian meaning to serve. At our last group reflection Brother Dennis challenged

“ASB changes the way students look at the world, their lives, and their relationships with God. Once you experience the world opening up to you, it's transformative.”

Fr. Dan Reim, S.J.
ASB Program Director

each of us: Would you do this if no one was going to say thank you? Would you, reading this, serve without asking anything in return? It changes the situation. Or does it? Through Brother Dennis's probing, I came to understand the meaning of service. It's not for the thank you's, or what I could gain. Sure, many times I will be thanked profusely for helping someone but that is not the purpose. I serve others simply because the world needs it. Every person deserves to be treated with dignity. I want to, I am called to return to humanity that dignity, which it is due.

Working to understand urban poverty

The Bronx, NY

Annette Hauswirth ('11 BA)

We had a glimpse of the glitz and glamour of the big city, but also had a chance to see what most people don't when they visit New York. We worked at the South Bronx Thrift Store, Nazareth Housing and with mentally disabled residents in Harlem, Manhattan, and the Bronx. We got to see how diverse the population is and learned about many of the unseen factors that create difficult situations for New Yorkers. Our experience helped us understand some of the problems associated with urban poverty. Each night, we took a moment together to reflect on the events of the day and discuss how and where we were able to see God in our work. This experience is something that will stay with us forever.



Lives changed forever through God's will

Charleston, WV

The Charleston ASB Group

Twelve individuals came together for this trip that began with early preparations in October. By God's will we were put in the same place for a certain reason, in a common bond to serve our Lord. We have grown together through this long experience and formed a bond of friendship that will forever be in our hearts. Our experience in Charleston helped us appreciate people who feel unvalued, unappreciated, or unimportant. I hope our presence helped them realize their unconditional value and importance in God's eyes as well as ours.



Showing God's love and kindness

Flint, MI

Ashley Deford ('11 BSN)

"You're going to Flint for Spring Break?" That seemed to be the question all 12 of us heard as we prepared for our arduous 55-mile voyage up US-23. It didn't seem like the tropical paradise or peaceful respite expected from college students, but it was the Spring Break that we signed up for. We couldn't possibly be prepared enough for the incredible journey and eye-opening experience that unfolded for us.

We arrived on a Sunday morning, just in time for a big family breakfast with our host family. From that moment, we felt very welcomed and comfortable in Flint. We knew the week would only bring us

joy and a closer feeling to God. Later that same day, we took our tour around Flint. We saw abandoned factories, brown fields and dilapidated housing. We saw the pain of the skeleton of a former Auto Industry Giant. We began to see the pain and feel the pain of a city desperately in need of help, and we wanted to do whatever we could to aid the life of even just one.

We volunteered at The Boys and Girls Club, St. Luke's Women's Center, The North End Soup Kitchen, Carriage Town Ministries Homeless Shelter and Habitat for Humanity. Our service varied from cleaning an art room, to cooking and serving food, to organizing, cleaning and renovating a house. We worked closely with the people most concerned for Flint.



We were the servants of the people and we learned that through our work we were showing God's love and kindness. In a city that is depressed and falling apart, we feel that we also brought some hope and brightness into the city through our inspirational work.

One week...12 strangers...Life-changing experiences

New Orleans, LA
Allie Malenfant ('12 BA)

To say that the ASB program has an impact would

be a major understatement. The two trips I have been on, both to New Orleans, LA, have affected me in ways that I will continue to discover far into the future. ASB has changed my life, challenged me to think beyond myself and my own desires, and has given me a profound sense of gratitude for the incredible gifts God has given me.

It only took about three days into last year's spring break trip for me to realize that I wanted to be a site leader this year. I fell in love with the city, yet was astounded at the devastation that was still evident three and a half years after Katrina. I was struck even more by the resilience and spirit of a city and people that had suffered so immensely at the hand of both nature and human negligence.

My first trip set a very high bar and I was nervous that this trip would not meet those expectations. I found out that we would be working in wetlands restoration and at a daycare. I tried really hard not to be, but a small part of me was initially disappointed that we wouldn't be doing the more "glorious" work of gutting or repairing houses that has become so synonymous with Katrina relief.

Despite my reservations, my experience was more incredible than I could have imagined. The biggest lesson I learned and the one that I'll continue to take with me forever is that our God is a God of surprises! He showed me so much about the nature of service: it's not about me! Sometimes doing God's work hurts a little bit; it might be different from what we anticipated, not as glorious, and sometimes we don't get the credit we think we deserve. However, if we open our eyes and hearts, we will see the eternal joy and reward by going through these "painful" learning experiences. For example, before spring break, I never realized how detrimental Katrina was on the wetlands in southeastern Louisiana,



and how quickly they are depleting. Our work with wetlands restoration showed us a much bigger picture of the impact of the storm: sure, it's extremely important to fix up houses, but what a blessing we have to finally be able to focus on long term restoration in the city. I never would have known this if I hadn't been given the opportunity to do a new type of work.

As everyone knows, the city of New Orleans is famous for Mardi Gras. Although spring break took place after Mardi Gras, we were able to experience it nonetheless, through the spirit and energy of the people there. There are three colors that symbolize Mardi Gras: gold for power, green for faith, and purple for justice. At the risk of oversimplifying such a profound and marvelous experience, I think that my trip can be summed up by these three colors and what they stand for.

I am receiving an education at one of the top universities in the country. With knowledge comes *power* and privilege.

I have the power to use the gifts God has given me to create change, little by little.

I have a deep and living *faith* in a God who loves His children beyond all human comprehension. Because of my faith in this loving God, I have a desire to serve because "faith, without works, is nothing" (James 2:17).

Finally, because of my power and faith, I am called to act with *justice* so that all of creation is treated with the dignity and respect it deserves and that God intends.

These are lessons that I will not only look fondly upon as something I learned on ASB 2010, but ones that I can and will take with me forever. The call to serve doesn't last for one week during spring break in college. It is one that God places on our hearts for our whole lives, and I am so thankful to have been able to continue on this journey of answering the call through ASB.

Every time I leave for New Orleans, I come back a better, more whole person.

Living, serving, and reflecting together, created and strengthened friendships and deepened our sense of community

Baltimore, MD

Elizabeth Ramus ('10 BGS)

Our group worked with Catholic Charities of Baltimore at a women's day shelter, a home for adults with developmental disabilities, a soup kitchen, a family shelter, and Head Start. We experienced a different aspect of urban poverty at each location and learned that there is not a stereotypical poor person. One thing the people we served did have in common was we were able to see God in them and know that our work was appreciated. An important lesson we learned was to be grateful for the gifts and blessings in our lives. Each night we spent time reflecting on our experiences and understanding the deeper meaning of the service we were doing. A recurrent theme in our reflections was that God has given us each specific gifts for a reason. For many of us, the highlight of the trip was our stay at Christopher Place—Catholic Charities' residential employment academy for men. We ate dinner with the residents nearly every night, and we even joined their running club for a 5:30 AM run! Many of these men were not



afraid to open up to us and share their stories in the hopes of passing along the lessons they had learned. We were touched by their willingness to share, and that made our service more meaningful.

Habitat for Humanity

Meridian, MS

Mike Tengel ('12 BA)

The Habitat home we were working on was in a relatively late stage of completion but there was still plenty of work to be done. Our group worked principally on two areas, laminate flooring inside and roofing outside. Both tasks were exciting but at times, (very) frustrating! Our construction supervisors couldn't have been more kind, hilarious, and most of all, patient since most of us were amateur construction workers! And each one of us triumphed over our vertigo and took a turn nailing shingles to the roof. Each day, our work began with a dedication—a scripture-based reflection on the goal of Habitat for Humanity—and ended with a reflection, led by a team of two group members. These reflections varied from deep spiritual discussions to team-building activities.



Building a room out of pure love and compassion

Cranks, KY

Kristin Kopec ('12 BS)

ASB 2010 - where you can go to the mountains to build a room from the ground up without a nail gun, with 12 students and no supervisor, and end up becoming a family.

We did have a few stumbling blocks. One of the most symbolic was a giant rock in the middle of where the floor should be. Through some amazing teamwork and a lot of digging, we finally managed to conquer it and wrench it out of the ground and into the river. Getting rid of the rock seemed to reflect being able to overcome the difficulties we are faced with in our own lives. It seemed like being able to get rid of that giant rock gave us the momentum to continue on and really build the family a foundation as best as we could.



Campus Ministry: Impacting students now, and in the future

By Steve Wolbert, Director of Development



When I first discovered campus ministry, I was like the more than 90% of Catholic students—I attended a secular college or university. I remember worrying about how I was going to continue my faith when I entered college. That was until the day

I entered the student parish and took ownership of my faith.

My story is not an uncommon one. “Taking ownership of my faith” is a recurring theme when you talk with the college students who attend and are active in the various ministries at St. Mary. And your support makes all these ministries possible. Whether it is a student who attends mass regularly as a freshman, or is walking through the doors for the first time as a senior, the 10,000 or so Catholic students at the University of Michigan know they have a home at St. Mary Student Parish.

This issue of Campus Connection is full of stories about Alternative Spring Break, and the great experiences these 96 students had. My family hosted the group of students who traveled to Flint, Michigan. I was able to see first-hand how

these students engage more deeply in their own faith and how they reach out and serve society. St. Mary Student Parish provides those opportunities through its campus ministry programs. Because of their participation, these students are prepared to become the future leaders of our faith, and the future leaders of society.

I know I am in the right place to help guide the development program at St. Mary’s and ensure that the campus ministry programs and staff are able to continue to operate at such a high level.

As a wise campus minister who dedicated his life to campus ministry said of this work, “The soul of education is the education of the Soul.” Without places like St. Mary Student Parish, Catholic college students at secular universities would miss out on this very important aspect of their education.

I am excited to be part of such a vibrant, thriving community. I am honored to be able to assist you in finding a way to impact the lives of these college students. Thank you so much for your support!

