

March 2007 Alternative Spring Break Trip

Prepared by Marie Ostrander, Student Co-Chair

We departed from Geneseo on Friday the ninth of March bound for a place that only a handful of the 49 onboard the bus had ever been before. These six faculty and 43 students, lead by student coordinators Fiorella Ugucconi and Marie Ostrander, had signed up for this trip knowing only that they were going to the Mississippi Gulf Coast and were about to spend a week working. They didn't know what sort of work, or where specifically they would be working, or what the week would bring; they only knew they would be helping.

After 22 hours on the bus we finally pulled in to the parking lot of the North Carolina Baptist Men's head quarters at a converted Gulfport armory. We were tired, sore, and in need of showers, but so happy to be away from the snow and cold of New York and in the warmth and sun of Mississippi. Once we were all checked in we made our ways to the Broadmoore Baptist Church, our accommodations for the week. Air mats and sleeping bags on the floor, two toilets to about 60 girls, and no hot water, and yet everyone seemed more than content and happy with what would be our home away from home for the next seven days. It of course helped that the beach was just a block away.

On Sunday the 49 of us piled onto the bus for what would be a day of fun and work. We traveled first down Highway 90. Running parallel to the Gulf it had been the commercial and tourist destination for Biloxi and Gulfport, but then came Katrina. What had been a long stretch of luxury hotels and casinos, restaurants, tourist stops, shops, retail centers, and historic homes was all but leveled by Katrina's 30 foot storm surge and driving winds. Now, a fraction of what was originally there has been rebuilt, mostly just the casinos. Foundations, signs, and stripped steel frames are all that remain to mark what once stood along the coast. Our first stop was at the recently completed Katrina Memorial in Biloxi, a beautiful tribute not just to those who perished in the storm, but to those who survived and are putting their loves back together on the coast. We all spent a good deal of time there, reflecting and remembering, before heading to a nearby beach. It was a special treat for all of us to spend an hour or so at a beautiful white sandy beach, warm Gulf breezes, and lapping waves; after all, it was our spring break and what would a break be without a trip to the beach. Although, even there there are constant reminders that all is far from normal: the signs warning not to enter the hazardous Gulf waters, the dangerous debris hiding just under the sand (as one of travelers found out), and the washed out Sharks Head souvenir shop that stand in the background of so many of our happy pictures.

Then came the first real work of the week. After a picnic lunch, obtained and organized by trip Mom and all around awesome person Connie Hurlburt, we set to work on the Harrison County Community Green Houses. Livingston County CARES had been offered the opportunity to restore a pair of green houses that were heavily damaged during the hurricane. One had been completely destroyed, while the other had only its frame and growing tables still intact. It was our job to clear out any of the remaining walls and equipment and all of the thick vegetation that had grown up in the months since Katrina. And clear it out we did, like a swarm of locusts we had that place emptied and ready for the next step of rebuilding. They took all of the larger vegetation out, even raking up the tiniest of twigs and leaves. In a matter of a couple hours it was like looking at a whole new green house. Anyone who saw the before and then the after would have been just as overwhelmed by how much these kids put into cleaning up this green house. It was amazing to see everyone just go at it and work together to get this job done, very impressive.

That night we got our first taste of North Carolina Baptist Men cuisine, and it wasn't bad at all. We also got our first experience of what it was to shower in a converted cargo container and share very close and very intimate quarters with total strangers. It was back to the church for group and team meetings so that everyone knew what was going on the next day and what to expect, and then it was time for bed.

Monday morning came very early, probably earlier than any of us been woken up in quite sometime. And, as would be the norm for the rest of the week, it was off to the Armory for breakfast, then off to our teams' sites. We still didn't know what to expect, and although we had tried to be so prepared, right off the bat things changed as teams arrived at their houses to find that the work they had

planned on doing had already been done, or couldn't be done. One team's house had nothing at all to be done, and another's home owner wasn't there to let them in. So we scrambled and threw some people on this team, and others to this house and just kept telling everyone to be flexible and roll with things as they came.

The teams, lead by Jen Delcourt, Maureen Gillard, Laura Lonski, Amanda Flannery, Breanna Hilko, all on return recovery trips, and Brien Gillette, a Mississippi newbie, set to work doing whatever needed to be done, no matter how mundane or seemingly inconsequential. They cleared debris from yards, fixed clogged drains, painted and fixed lawn furniture, moved boxes, and picked up garbage and debris from a road. But they also accomplished much bigger things, constructing a porch, replacing sheetrock, painting the outside and insides of homes, hanging doors, laying insulation, tiling and grouting floors, replacing crown molding, tearing down and hauling away out buildings that had come down in the storm, and began replacing a roof. They accomplished so much in such a short time. People should be so proud and this group should get such credit for everything they did.

Through the minor catastrophes, missing tools, lacking work, mix ups and mess ups, and a handful of slight injuries (fire ants, rusty nails) everyone kept their spirits ridiculously high and there has never been so much laughter and good-humored joking coming from anyone who had just spent a day in the pouring rain or blistering sun. This trip was a true success in so many different ways. There are the literal hundreds of labor hours which went into these houses, labor that was always done with so much pride and care. There are also the lessons to be taken from this experience. Had there not been such amazing cooperation and understanding on behalf of everyone this trip would have downright painful at times. All had to work together as smaller teams and as a larger group no matter what was thought of another or what may have happened back in Geneseo. And we all had to be understating of the differences among ourselves, and more importantly on behalf of the people we helped and those who we met in Mississippi.

As the week wound down the group was treated to a much deserved treat, Thursday night dinner at The Shed, a true southern barbeque joint offering a setting just as lively as the food. We all marveled at the menus, especially after a week of having absolutely no choice in what we ate for breakfast, lunch, or dinner. And once the food arrived, we were left in even more awe. Most took the opportunity to enjoy some real southern ribs, and then gazed in amazement at what a rack of ribs *really* looks like. Others enjoyed pulled pork or chicken sandwiches, wings that were nothing like what we have up North, and sides of mac salad and coleslaw that still make the mouth water just thinking about. Stuffed and happy we headed back to Broadmoore Baptist Church and enjoyed one last nighttime soccer game on the beach before going to bed, our last night in Mississippi.

Leaving for home was very bittersweet. There's that anxiousness just to get home, to enjoy a long hot shower, a night in a real bed, TV, internet, and to tell everyone you know about Mississippi. But at the same time, you just don't want to leave, you know there is so much more work to be done, there are people who you've befriended, places that you've come to know, and the weather can't be beat. But 22 hours later we were back in Geneseo, colder than ever, a bit sunburned, desperate for showers, and already missing Mississippi.