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Increasing commitment to serve



Northeastern students work in Otavalo, Ecuador, during their alternative spring break. Photo by Kristen Simonelli

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Working with abused and neglected children in Mississippi might not come immediately to mind when college students dream of spring break. But for sophomore Sarah Lucey, it was “rewarding — incredibly rewarding.”

Lucey was one of 154 students who spent the week working on projects across the country, as well as in the Caribbean and South America, as part of Northeastern’s Alternative Spring Break (ASB). The groups, each accompanied by a University staff member, worked to ameliorate problems related to the environment, poverty, housing, children or animal treatment.

Sara De Ritter, associate director at Northeastern’s Center of Community Service, noted that the University considers ASB a great experiential learning opportunity and has sponsored it for several years, but “this was definitely our largest ever.”

Increasingly, she said, “students are arriving at Northeastern with a sense of commitment to service. Programs like ASB allow them to continue and deepen that involvement.”

The University arranged 14 projects this year, working with a national organization that maintains a database of nonprofit groups seeking help. Students apply to join an ASB trip and then raise funds to cover the costs of their travel and lodging.

Lucey, who is majoring in human services with a minor in international affairs, said working at the Mississippi Children’s Home in Natchez had a profound personal impact on her and her peers. “These kids had such hard lives, and they’re so small, but they made us so happy,” she said.

She also discovered synergies with her academic pursuits. “I had never worked with children before, and as a human services major I was curious to see how I would work in that capacity,” she said.

Sara Hamilton, assistant director of the Center of Community Service, joined a group of students in Lucedale, Mississippi, building houses with Habitat for Humanity. “We constructed a roof, built a porch, painted a home and put up vinyl siding,” she said. One of the new homes, she said, will enable a mother with seven children to move out of their overcrowded trailer.

De Ritter accompanied a group that worked in habitat restoration and removal of invasive plants in California’s Bay Area. Other ASB groups went to Arizona, Arkansas, Texas, Florida, Washington, D.C., Jamaica, Ecuador and the Dominican Republic.

The Center of Community Service, which organizes ASB, connects Northeastern students with more than 200 community partners throughout the year on projects in the region, and also hosts two annual service days for students to join quick-impact projects in the Boston area.

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