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Appalachia relaxing as well as rewarding

By EDWARD IMBUS
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Over fall break most students left for home to relax after a difficult time with midterm exams. Others stayed on campus, trying to get ahead in their studies, or simply catch up. Another group of students, however, put both relaxation and studies on hold to instead provide a week of volunteer service to the rural poor of the Appalachia region.

Over a hundred students trekked out to twelve different sites throughout the Appalachia mountains determined to make a difference, even if but a small one, for the better during their "week off."

These students were participating in the Appalachia Seminar, a single credit, pass-fail theology class sponsored by the Center for Social Concerns. For the course, students are required to go to lectures before and after their week away, topped off by either a special project or five page reflection paper.

The initial lectures, however, were simply that: basic preparation, which was by no means a proper substitute for the experience the students would find on the mountains.

The Appalachia Seminar, since its beginning several years before, has been highly organized, sending students to organizations, most religious-based, to allow the students to understand the problems of the rural poor, rather than simply observing

them.

Under the auspices of the Christian Appalachia Project (CAP) of south central Kentucky, a group of eight students were charged with assisting in renovating two extremely old and dilapidated houses. CAP had already planned the needed structural changes; they both needed new roofs to replace the weak and leaky ones in place before the wet autumn and snowy winters came. One of the homes also needed siding to protect its wooden walls from rot.

Eight people, of whom none knew two others before the seminar started, began the group effort to provide what progress they could to help. The work was difficult, taking lots of time and perspiration, and in most cases precision was a requirement.

As one of the professional carpenters also on the site said, however, "It's not the work we look forward to; it's the people." Those receiving the help made the long days worth all the time and energy exerted.

The time was curiously relaxing, with no studies to worry about and the knowledge that the time was not idle, either. At nights, the group would sit around campfires, hike to various parts of the pristine countryside, and discuss reactions to what they saw.

The Appalachia Seminar proved to be a valuable experience for those who went, extolling the values of Our Lady in the midst of natural beauty all around. It is a time made for Notre Dame students, and is not to be missed.

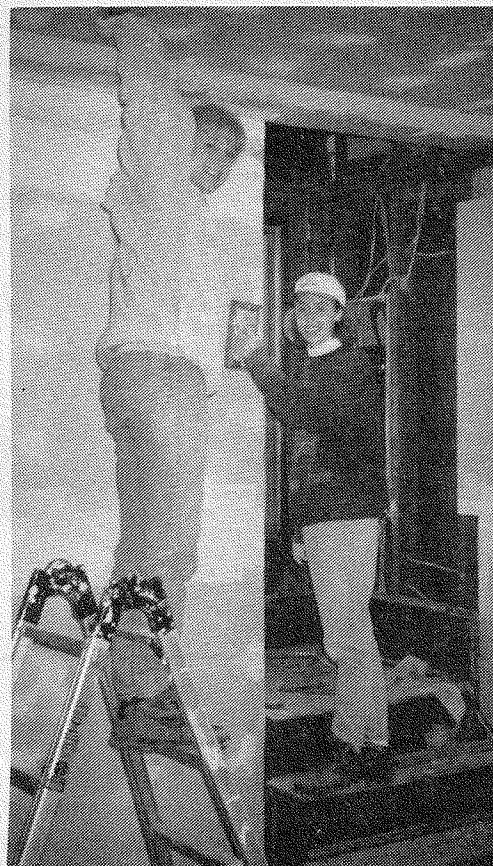


Photo courtesy of Kira Hutchinson
Gretchen Stephans and Emily Portune worked in West Virginia for the McDowell Mission.

Task force hits the road

By SHANNON DUNN
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This Fall Break, five members of the Appalachia Task Force, or the coordinators of the Appalachia Seminar, traveled down into Appalachia to visit the sites where Notre Dame sends its students. This was the first time the Task Force had attempted such a trip. We took off bound for Kentucky, Tennessee, and West Virginia, and managed to make it to nine of the eleven sites that the seminar utilizes. Our goals were to become better informed on the specific details of each site and to make sure that the seminar was running smoothly for both the students and the sites involved. All in all, we far exceeded our goals and we had a fantastic time.

Our agenda was to interview the staff members at each site in order to gain a sense of the type of service work the site involved in,

and a sense of the origins and history of each site. In order to best document the information we received, we audio and video taped as much as possible. I was struck by the dedication of the people we interviewed to bettering the way of life for the less privileged of Appalachia. It was truly inspiring. A recurring theme during our interviews was "empowerment." The sites and organizations are geared towards empowering the people they help into having a vested interest in the people and land.

I especially enjoyed seeing and talking with the students at each site. Judging from the enthusiastic comments and volume of laughter late at night, I would say that the seminar was fulfilling and a success. This reaffirms my dedication to maintaining the best aspects of the seminar and also to continue working towards a better program for the future. The Task Force was thrilled to observe and work with the students and we were proud of their compassion and openness to new challenges.

Aside from the business aspects of our trip, a lot can happen while driving around for six days. On our first night, we got stuck in a ditch. This gave our minivan rental a muddy, rugged look for the remainder of the trip. The next day we smashed the taillight of another van. That was it for minivan injuries. My job was to navigate and make sure that we never, or rarely, turned onto the wrong, curvy, nausea-inducing road. Whether we were cruising while listening to John Denver hits, sitting around the campfire absorbing enough smoke to become self-contained beef jerky making factories, or simply contemplating that next shower or non-outhouse toilet, we were having a blast.

Our trip was extremely worthwhile and we look forward to a great finale for this seminar and an equally exciting one in the spring.