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Biology Students Going Green: HFH Service Trip

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Lake Forest College Habitat for Humanity members gather for a group picture.

It’s 12:55 a.m. and I’m sitting on the floor in a church in Foley, Alabama, staring at our Cellular and Molecular Biology Powerpoint presentation. I’ve been awake since 6:00 a.m. and I spent most of the day building a roof in 90 degree heat. “Five more minutes.” Alina says, “then we can go to bed.” I sigh and continue to build a new figure for the 23rd slide of our presentation. Five minutes pass and I leave. I fall asleep the second my head hits my pillow. I decide that homework and house-building don’t mix—or maybe it’s just the homework part.

Most students plan on spending their spring break on tropical vacations, at home with family, or catching up on homework. For twenty-one Lake Forest College students, however, spring break seemed like a perfect time to participate in a week-long ‘alternative’ spring break building houses with Habitat for Humanity.

Habitat for Humanity International is a nonprofit, ecumenical Christian housing organization that seeks to eliminate poverty and homelessness by providing affordable housing to families in need. Families apply to be accepted into the Habitat program and, if accepted, receive a myriad of different services, including a new home. Families must take classes teaching them about how to properly manage their finances, and they must even participate in a certain number of hours of construction on their new home.

Habitat for Humanity is headed by President Rob Erickson, and faculty advisor Casey Malsam. Both Casey and Rob helped to organize the service-trip down to Foley, which involved a 2-day ride in the Lake Forest Shuttle Bus and a stop in Nashville, Tennessee.

Five biology students, including myself, participated in the Habitat for Humanity Spring Break Service Trip in Foley, Alabama. Daniella Brutman ’12, Kayla Ahlstrand ’12, Paulius Kuprys ’12, Alina Konnikova ’11, Shannon VerWoert ’11, and I all happily attended the weeklong trip down to Alabama. Our group was lucky enough to stay in a Methodist Church, which provided a full kitchen, several extra rooms, showers, and air conditioning.

The five days of construction focused on three different build-sites: The Women’s Build, The Youth Build, and the Green Build. The Women’s Build is an exclusively female building site. This means that men are not permitted to participate in any of the actual construction of the house and are only present as volunteer contractors who are required to be present at the site. This allows women participating at the site to feel empowered and independent. The Youth build is a site specifically dedicated to youth involvement in service. Only individuals under the age of 25 are permitted to participate in building. This build was also a ‘frame day’ in which our group was able to construct the complete frame of a house in only one day. And finally, the Green Build is a build site that was dedicated to creating an environmentally neutral house.

Various rules were set in place on the build site to ensure certification as a green build. We were instructed to not throw away any trash we had on the site because all garbage was accounted for each day and factored into a complicated point system in which points were deducted for excess garbage. Instead of standard drywall, the house was insulated with a mixture of recycled newspapers. Windows were strategically placed as to positively contribute to temperature control. Even the perimeter of the build site was restricted to protect the environment surrounding the property. Once the house was complete, all points from each aspect of the build were added up and, if it met the qualifications, the house was certified as a “Green” house.

All members on the trip, including biology students, were able to work with power tools, hammers, and saws, and each student was able to participate in activities they had never even dreamed of doing. Alina Konnikova and I helped install the electrical wiring on the house. Shannon VerWoert helped build an energy-efficient roof. Paulius Kuprys was one of the few men allowed on the Women’s Build. And that’s just naming a few!

Overall, biology students were able to take a hands-on approach at saving the environment they had learned about in classes like Tropical Rainforests or Ecology and Evolution. Not only is Habitat for Humanity providing affordable housing for impoverished families, but they are trying to be environmentally conscious too.

While working in the hot, Southern sun for eight hours performing manual labor may not sound like much fun, I can honestly say it was one of the most enjoyable and rewarding experiences I have ever had, and it even made staying up until 1 a.m. finishing a presentation completely worth it.

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