**2015 Spring Alternative Break Experience**

For many East Carolina University students, spring break is a time to take a break from school and enjoy warmer locales but over forty ECU pirates made it a week on and not a week off. These ECU Pirates committed to being a part of ECU Alternative Break Experiences (ABE). The mission of the East Carolina University ABE is to create active citizens, leaders, and advocates for lasting social change.

The 2015 Spring ABE program offered five diverse experiences and engaged fifty-five ECU students and staff members. In one week, this translates to over 1,900 hours of learning, service, and community development committed by ECU community. The Spring 2015 Alternative Break Experiences were offered by the following student affairs areas:

- Student Recreation and Wellness Adventure Program ABE paddled the Suwannee River in Florida
- Campus Living ABE combated urban poverty in metro Atlanta, Georgia;
- Volunteer and Service-Learning Center ABE focused on issues of poverty and health care in Baltimore, Maryland; environmental justice, sustainability and economic impact in Atlantic Beach in Carteret County, NC; and explored the issues poverty and youth during their “Staycation” in Greenville, NC.

One of the newest additions to the 2015 Spring ABE program was the “staycation” opportunity in Greenville. Thirteen ECU students and staff members slept in sleeping bags on the floor of the Greenville Community Shelter. “It gave them a feel for what our residents deal with on a daily basis,” said Casey Holland, the shelter’s program development director and retired ECU staff member. In addition to serving and learning with the Greenville Community Shelter, the team also worked with other non-profit agencies including NC Civil, United Way of Pitt County, the Lucille W. Gorham Intergenerational Community Center, Third Street Community Center, Greenville Harvest and the Police Athletic League.

Many of the students didn’t know the shelter – only a few blocks from campus – was there. “ECU has us a little bit sheltered,” said Mario Scott, a junior from Greensboro majoring in business management. “There are people in poverty in our own backyard. A lot of people don’t see this side of it.” While some friends were heading to Florida for spring break, Scott was happy to stay behind. “It’s a better joy when you can help somebody,” Scott said. Talking with residents has been a reality check, Scott said. “You can have a four-year degree, and be homeless tomorrow,” he said.

“I didn’t know much about what was going on in my own community so it was definitely an eye-opener,” said Khiana Wyatt, a junior from Wilson majoring in family and community services. Wyatt’s first visit to the shelter was in October, when she led a student work group in “Make a Difference Day.” She also took part in last year’s alternative spring break trip to Baltimore, Maryland, which focused on hunger and homelessness.

As a child, Wyatt was enrolled in Head Start, which serves at-risk preschool children and their families. “Now I’m in college and thinking about grad school,” she said. “If I can do it, others can do it too. If they see me doing it, maybe they will be inspired.”
Holland hopes the students will share their experience and increase awareness about the non-profit agency, whose 78 beds have been consistently full since cold temperatures hit eastern North Carolina. The Manhattan Avenue shelter, which usually is open to residents overnight, remained open around the clock for at least 14 days when temperatures dipped to single digits, Holland said. They saw a side of Greenville that many were previously unaware of. “It’s a new experience for me,” said Roderick Hall, a freshman from Riegelwood majoring in philosophy and political science. “The best way to understand somebody is to take a walk in their shoes.” Hall wants to work with underprivileged youth and start his own non-profit organization one day. He enjoyed talking and playing games with the children at the shelter. “It’s been an amazing experience to sit down and listen to their stories,” Hall said. “It doesn’t matter if a kid is underprivileged or privileged, kids are kids.”

“It’s interesting to see how what they’re doing connects with what they’re learning,” said Nichelle Shuck, associate director for student leadership and educational programs at ECU’s Volunteer and Service-Learning Center. Many students shared that one of the biggest takeaways was the food challenge. This is a challenge for each person to live on a $7 a day poverty budget. ABE students shared that this was an eye opening experience because for many this is the first time they have to live off of a budget and learn how to cook for more than one person.

Students were encouraged to immerse themselves in the issues of poverty. This included walking to many of the places they went instead of driving and reflecting on some of the privileges within our everyday lifestyle. “We’re breaking down barriers, we’re looking critically at where we are and what our relationship with the community looks like.” Shuck said.

One of the key components to the Alternative Break Experience is reflection. As part of VSLC ABE students will write a collective essay, “This We Believe,” about their experience as well as make a video with photos and songs from the week. The ABE program will invite ABE participants to engage in a reflection ceremony April 1st from 4-5:30 in the Croatan Green Room. This is a great time for students and staff to reflect about their life changing experience and re-commit to making social change in our communities.

ECU offers alternative break experiences throughout the year to create student learning opportunities in diverse environments that address social, economic, political, environmental, spiritual and cultural issues. Students learn through the exchange of ideas, personal reflection, critical thinking and by applying academic concepts outside the classroom. For more information please visit www.ecu.edu/altbreaks or check out the ABE OrgSync Portal: https://orgsync.com/69125/chapter.

http://www.ecu.edu/cs-admin/news/staycation15.cfm