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UIS students leave for volunteer spring break

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Spring break for many college students used to mean lounging on the beaches of Florida or Texas during the day and carousing in local bars at night.

But for an increasing number of students, including about 40 at the University of Illinois Springfield, it means trading swimsuits and beer for hammers, nails and shovels.

A record number of UIS students and three advisers left Friday night for a week of volunteering in Galveston, Texas, helping with recovery efforts following Hurricane Ike. The hurricane washed over Galveston Island and Bolivar Peninsula on Sept. 13, 2008.

More than 300 college and university students from across the country will stay 20 to 25 in a room at Alamo Elementary School for the week. They will be bused to several sites to do a variety of work, said Kelly Thompson, director of the Volunteer and Civic Engagement Center at UIS.

The UIS students are taking on the project as part of the One Mission Initiative, a faith-based organization created to help restore Galveston and the surrounding area after the storm's devastation.

The group's mission, according to its Web site, is to "bring volunteers to Galveston to not only provide much needed help, labor and support to the community here, but to also provide love, hope and encouragement."

"When you do service for an entire week with someone, you can see the change you've made in someone's life," said Jaleesa Earthely, a UIS junior from Bolingbrook who is making the trip. "That gives me joy."

Second year for group

The UIS Alternative Spring Break student organization was formed last year, when about 20 students went to Mandeville, La., to help build homes for Habitat for Humanity after Hurricane Katrina.

Zach Berillo, a senior from Crystal Lake, heads the campus Habitat for Humanity organization and will be among about 10 students representing Habitat on the 2010 trip.

When the students voted on where to focus their volunteer efforts this spring, Thompson said, "they decided if they were going to be on a bus for 17 hours, they wanted to go somewhere warmer rather than someplace colder."

Two years ago, Berillo accompanied a group from Habitat to Sioux Falls, S.D., to help build homes.

"It got a little chilly," he said.

The students will work 8 1/2 hours a day in Galveston to rebuild and refurbish homes that were damaged by the storm. Volunteers will also be visiting homebound residents, helping to feed the homeless and assisting in other community-related activities. They get Sunday off to sightsee.

The group returns March 20.

Thompson said that as an adviser to the UIS Alternative Spring Break organization, she gives the students ideas. The group also subscribes to Break Away, a nonprofit organization that provides alternative spring break training and resources to about 130 schools. Break Away's site bank lists more than 450 spring break volunteer opportunities.

'More than a tan'

The One Mission Initiative, a faith-based organization, won the group's services over some Habitat for Humanity locations.

"Last year, we went to New Orleans, and although it was a great experience, we were isolated when we came back from the work site," Thompson said. "This will be nice, to be with other students doing service."

Berillo said he's looking forward to meeting new people and "seeing how thankful they are for the things you're doing for them."

He said the group looked at 15 or so opportunities before deciding on the One Mission Initiative in Galveston.

"It was a little more expensive, but it looked like a really well organized and well set-up program," he said.

"There also was more variety in the things we could do," including drywalling, roofing, landscaping, painting and debris cleanup.

Berillo said One Mission Initiative is working on three house structures and roofing, "and you can work on any stage of the house."

Students list on an application any types of work they've done previously. Americorps also has team leaders to assist the students.

Volunteers hope to bring home more than a tan.

"I will bring back more of an appreciation for the things I have," Earthely said. "To see these places humbles you and makes you want to do more."

How the trip is funded

Funding for the eight-day trip for 40 University of Illinois Springfield students to help the recovery in Galveston, Texas, from a devastating 2008 hurricane comes from a variety of sources, said Kelly Thompson, director of the Volunteer and Civic Engagement

Center at UIS.

Each student must pay \$150 for housing and meals to make the trip, and that doesn't include about \$7,000 for a charter bus, and some other meals. The average domestic trip costs between \$250 and \$300 per student, according to Break Away.

Different university departments and some individual staff members contribute, including the vice chancellor's office, the Volunteer Center, Office of Student Life and the Diversity Center.

The students also had to go before the Inter-Club Council Board, made up of their peers, to make a presentation and ask for funding, she said.

Thompson said the Alternative Spring Break organization takes into account the economy when planning volunteer trips.

"Funding makes a huge difference," she said. "We have some students who aren't able to pay for their trip, and some money goes toward that. And we looked closely at travel expenses."

She said about 90 percent of the students are able to pay the \$150, which goes to One Mission Initiative to help cover its costs to house the students.

The elementary school where the group will stay, along with more than 250 students from other colleges, is bringing in cots and shower set-ups because of the number of volunteers expected.

Thompson said the group has done fundraisers on campus ranging from bake sales to a talent show, asked former teachers for sponsorship money, and has solicited funds through a Web site.

"It's important for people to realize how much work they've put into this," Thompson said.

Student volunteers

Break Away, an Atlanta-based nonprofit, estimates that about 65,000 college students participated in some type of volunteer alternative spring break activities in 2009, an increase of 11 percent over 2008 and an 80 percent more than the 36,000 who participated in 2006.

Break Away's mission is to train, assist and connect campuses and communities in promoting quality alternative break programs.

Information

More information on volunteer opportunities at UIS is available at the Volunteer and Civic Engagement Center's Web site at www.uis.edu/volunteer.

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