

Don't Worry, Be Helpful: Mason Students Use Break to Volunteer in Jamaica

By Penny Gilchrist, New Century College

Most college students who travel to Jamaica over a break do so to laze around the pool or splash around in the Caribbean. Not so for 12 George Mason University students. Their trip meant making a difference in the lives of some of the island's youngest inhabitants, and it gave them an experience they cherished beyond any visit to a palm-treed resort.

For the past three years, [New Century College](#) professor and [Center for Leadership and Community Engagement](#) (CLCE) director Wendy Wagner has led a group of students on the Jamaican Alternative Break trip. Undertaken in collaboration with the Volunteer in Jamaica Opportunity Network, the trip offers Mason students a chance to effect positive change, expand teamwork and leadership skills, and develop sustained partnerships with the community organizations they serve.

"The principle that CLCE holds across the board is the development of relationships instead of 'drive-by service,' jumping in and out of peoples' lives," says Wagner. "We encourage students to do more than just show up."



For the past three years, Mason students have gone to Jamaica during Alternative Break. Above, Hope Basic preschoolers enjoy playground equipment built by Mason students on a previous Alternative Break, while the most recent break participants supervise. Photo courtesy of New Century College.

For the 2013 trip, the Jamaican Alternative Break students spent five days working with the children of Hope Basic, a preschool for children three to six years old in the rural Treasure Beach area on the southwestern coast

of the island. Before the trip, the students discussed international development strategies: What services could they provide, and how could they ensure a lasting impact? What are the assets of the people they want to help, and how can the students continue to provide help even after they have left the island?

Rhonda Singleton, a junior in the Bachelor of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies (BAIS) program majoring in early childhood education and psychology, found the Jamaican children “happy, smart, and eager to learn.” Singleton, who works as a preschool teacher, took along teaching materials, including a colorful poster that read, “Be Thankful.” When she was working with the Hope Basic children, they said they were thankful for family and friends. Singleton says, “They didn’t have fancy things to be thankful for. I was reminded that you don’t need fancy things to be happy”—a concept Singleton says she understands as she works her way through college.

It was Singleton who helped the other Mason students — some of whom had never worked with young children — adapt to the challenges. The most surprising lesson her teammates learned? “Patience,” Singleton says.



Hope Basic students with, left to right, Jamaican Alternative Break 2013 students Oniye Okolo, Priyanka Debroy, Sunzhe Cao, and Melita Wongus. Photo courtesy of New Century College.

The children quickly attached themselves to the Mason students. Along with words of thanks, Hope Basic’s teacher, the children’s parents, and other residents showed their appreciation with gifts of fresh fruit and vegetables, and offers of transportation.

The expressions of appreciation were themselves appreciated by the Mason students, who undertook the trip committed to fully immersing themselves in the local community. This also meant, though, that they slept in open-air bamboo structures, had no running water or electricity, and used makeshift outdoor showers. Their meals consisted of local staples: salt fish, jerk chicken, and guava and mangoes picked from the tree.

“The food was delicious,” says trip leader Maia Wise, BAIS pre-physical therapy. “And although living conditions were much different from what we were used to, the looks on the children’s faces when we arrived at the school each morning made it all worthwhile.”



Melita Wongus and other Mason students read to the Hope Basic children during their Alternative Break to Jamaica. Photo courtesy of New Century College.

Just a few steps from the student’s shelters, the Caribbean Ocean splashed onto the beach. The Mason students say that the endless expanse of water took on a new meaning for them as they realized that the Hope Basic schoolchildren have no fresh water to drink and rely on juice boxes at snack time and water ladled from a bucket to wash their hands.

“On the first day, when the children saw us drinking from the water bottles we’d bought at the little local store, they got so excited that the rest of the week we brought extra bottles of water to pour into their mouths at snack time. It was such a treat for them,” says Wise.

“Throughout my years at Mason, I have been searching for my passion, something that makes me feel complete,” Wise continues. “This trip helped pinpoint what I want to do with my life: travel overseas and help with health education.” She has since applied to the Peace Corps.

But Wise’s decision is not the only evidence of change the trip brought about for the Mason students. Melita Wongus, senior majoring in global community health, was sad to learn that many of the local elementary-age children did not have textbooks in their classrooms. “Young children are so excited about learning, and it’s important to make those early years count,” she says. So, this fall, Wongus is launching the Fund Raising for Education Initiative to collect new and gently used textbooks from the Mason community to send where they are needed.

“Our greatest success is not our college achievements or future career,” says Wongus. “It’s what we give back.”

The Center for Leadership and Community Engagement (CLCE) organizes an number of Alternative Breaks

throughout the year. To find out more, visit clce.gmu.edu.