Spring break trips

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This spring break, school all over America set their students and teachers free for a week to enjoy time with friends, family and the change of the season. While some students made the trip home to see family and others took their vacations various different places; many teams of students from Harding University turned their breaks into opportunities to share Christ through service.

 One such team made their travels to the country of Belize.

 Belize is on the coastline and boarders Southern Mexico North-western Guatemala. It is only about a three hour flight and it shares the same time zone as Arkansas making it an easy destination to travel to and the native language there is English making it a prime place to do short term missions work.

“It’s a great training ground for students who want to think about being missionaries,” Said Steve Shaner, Harding University teacher who led the mission team to Belize. “While the convinces there are not nearly what they are here, it’s rough enough and third world enough but still available enough to still get a clean hotel room that’s safe but by no means a lot of frills.”

 Shaner teaches advertising in the communications department had made this trip to Belize before both as a leader once and participating several times.

 The team that traveled to Belize worked with three different churches there in different villages. They worked in Punta Gorda, San Pedro Columbia and San Antonio Belize encouraging the brothers and sisters in Christ there and also reach out to the community.

 In the mornings they helped paint a building and work sanding down and varnishing church pews. In the afternoons the team ran vacation bible schools for the many children in the villages for the three congregations.

 Unlike the other two overseas Spring Break Trips Harding students participated in, this one was strictly missions and work oriented; though they did get to enjoy one day at the beach.

 “Belize is so beautiful. I’ve built so many relationships there,” said Kara Schwab, a Harding University student who was part of the Belize team. “My heart is in Belize, I have to go back and get it.”

Harding’s connections to Florence, Italy are deep and decades old, and 22 mass communication students spent their spring break looking for the people, places and experiences that make HUF one of Harding’s most popular international programs.

The students were chosen for the trip by Dr. Mike James, Dr. Jack Shock and Dr. Jim Miller, who judged applicants from several majors based on past work examples and submitted resumes. The 22 selected students were used to form two teams: one to produce a promotional documentary for the International Programs office and one to find and report on stories around Florence for the Link, the student-produced Web site for the College of Communication.

Three hours of credit were offered to students participating in the trip, but no further incentive was needed for junior public relations major Abby Kellet, who worked on the Link team with 11 other students. As soon as the trip was announced last fall, she wanted in.

“Even though I didn't understand all the details, I knew I was going to do everything in my power to be on that plane to Italy,” Kellet said. “I have never heard of such an amazing opportunity like that at Harding before.”

She and the other Link reporters were given access to professional-grade equipment and some help from Dr. Miller, who advised them and helped set up interviews. Though each team member was expected to produce multimedia stories every day for the Link and for personal blogs, Kellet said Miller and the other professors knew that “students chosen to report on a trip like that shouldn't need someone to hold their hand and tell them what to do and report on every moment of the day.”

The Link team worked long days and published dozens of articles that Miller said would hopefully be used to promote HUF, but their primary purpose in Florence was to learn. Finding stories amidst language and culture barriers was a “wonderful experience” for the mass media students, he said, and after interviewing the mayor of Scandicci, the head chef for Italy’s national soccer team and several other figures, the Link students will have plenty of new material for their portfolios.

Seniors Tyler Jones and Nick Michael led the documentary team and were the original catalysts for the trip. Before the trip was opened up to the entire mass communication department, Dr. Jeff Hopper of the Honors College had approached Jones and Michael about making a promotional video for HUF. Both students are accomplished documentarians, and both had spent a semester at HUF. As talks progressed the Link was incorporated and class credit was offered, but Jones said he and his team of ten “were given creative control to really capture HUF as we remembered it.”

The documentary team members, most of whom had been to HUF, followed current HUF students around Italy as they participated in activities that define the HUF experience, ranging from life at the Harding Villa to a photo scavenger hunt in seaside Cinque Terra. The final product will be a 30-minute DVD designed to promote the program to interested students, though Jones said that, more than any of the adventures or the traveling, the real “hook” of the program is the authentic Italian atmosphere that HUF students are exposed to.

“I hope that anyone that watches this who’s been to HUF will believe that we didn’t try to sell HUF, that we let the experience speak for itself,” Jones said.

Transformation was the theme for 22 Harding students who spent their spring break searching for God in the people of Nicaragua. With Andrew Baker, director of the Institute for Church and Family at Harding, and Philip Holsinger leading a variety of students ranging in majors from Communication to Education, the group set out to interact and, essentially, witness the everyday lives of people in the city of Jinotega.

Mision Para Cristo, a multi-faceted mission in Jinotega run by Baker’s parents, Benny and Donna, served as the platform for students to experiment with their talents. Baker’s vision for this spring break mission was to intentionally avoid making any concrete plans outside of facilitating students ability to use their majors, passions and interests to further the kingdom of God. As far as what those pursuits might look like, Baker left that journey up to the dynamic of the group and where it would take them.

Knowing the students would leave more changed than the people of Jinotega, Baker challenged the students to find God in every conversation, documentaion and interaction. “Everybody saw God in some way,” said Baker, “the people in Nicaragua didn’t need us. This was opportunity for growth for us personally and it benefited the people of Nicaragua. It’s an opportunity for individual and group transformation.”

With class credit and resources in tow, the students set out to be transformed. Communication students went out with cameras, interviewing people in the markets, Communication Disorders students provided hearing screenings and Bible students studied the spiritual attitudes of Nicaraguan teens in comparison with research conducted at Uplift last year. Class credit was granted under the same logistics as the spring break HUF project along with credit available through the Bible department.

Flor Ramos, a Broadcasting Journalism major from El Salvador, jumped at the opportunity to spend her spring break documenting the stories of real people she identified with. Expressing enthusiasm for her Spanish background, Ramos served as a translator, reporter and visual artist. Ramos felt an intense connection with the people she met and interviewed, reminded of her history of humble beginnings with her family working their way to a better future.

 “That girl with the tortillas on her head, beaten up if she doesn’t sell them, that girl could have been me,” said Ramos.

Expressing her purpose for being in Nicaragua, Ramos felt her work was embedded in witnessing and simply being present and that alone would be a platform for transformation. “The trip was about just being there, watching, listening, documenting everyday people. By being there, witnessing everyday people, you’re finding God, “ said Ramos, “I want to be a medium. God works and is still there in those poverty places.”

Many claim the trip to be a success and look forward to similar opportunities in the future. Baker looks forward to continuing to be a part of these experiences and hopes that more and more spring break and similar summer opportunities will be in view.