

Saturday, March 8th, 2014, Lil:

The Alabama spring break service trip is off to a great start. The general consensus has been that the first day really allowed us to open up to one another, especially because we were in the car for about 8 hours.

This morning we met in the Kaufman parking lot at 7:30 am, only to find that van #1 had a dead battery. Being the flexible and resourceful group that we are, we used another trip's van because they had a later departure time. Then, Gary (adult supervisor) passed I-81 South, and lost the other vans. The morning was more comical than frustrating, and everyone went with the flow.

We stopped for lunch at a bootleg subway in the middle of nowhere Virginia. While we were there, two separate Dickinson cars showed up. It was hilarious that we bumped into Dickinson students even in the most rural part of Virginia at a random subway.

The car rides were so great. From naps to country music to eating and great conversations, we really made the most of our hours spent together.

We are in Knoxville, TN for the night. We went to the Market Square for dinner and enjoyed some Tennessee culture.

We are all exhausted, but cannot express how thrilled we are to be going to Alabama.

BAMA IN THE MORNING!

Saturday, March 8th, 2014, Trevor:

Today was great. A lot of driving but I feel like we all got to know each other a little bit better on the ride. Down side to the morning was one van did not start and there was no breakfast.

We made a stop at the Dickinson Subway in the middle of Virginia. Weird, I know, but it was good and really hit the spot.

Next we arrived at our hotel and after a wonderful pizza place in Market Square.

I am looking forward to the hike tomorrow and beginning our service.

Sunday, March 9th, 2014, Solai:

When I look back on today, it's hard to remember anything but exhaustion and happiness and sunny weather. This morning, I think, I was more prepared (mentally) for the experience that was to come. Yesterday I felt very unsure and a bit confused due to not knowing most of the

group outside of the meetings we used to have, but I feel more confident and open today. I enjoyed the final hours of the ride to Alabama. A few of us talked about weird high school experiences, which is something I haven't sat around and reminisced about in a while. I feel very disconnected from my pre-Dickinson life. Reaching our destination was an exciting sigh of relief for many of us. I felt great when we met Chris and saw the environment we were going to be working in. I don't know how to put this but it kind of reminded me of why I am really here (I've been really caught up in the whole meeting people aspect) and how great/wonderful/generous/lovely people really are. I'm really glad to be surrounded by 14 others who are exactly all of these things. My highlight of the day though was ABSOLUTLEY the hike. It was such a relief not dealing with cold weather and being able to embrace the nature around us. I got a bit distracted by all the beauty around me, but I got the opportunity to have many little conversations with people which I loved. I'm excited to delve into new, vibrant conversations and I'm really trying to let myself be open and comfortable with everyone. My greatest challenge will be to allow myself to shake the many thoughts I have rather than being stuck in my own head as often as I am. I do find it interesting that we are all staying in and working with a church considering that religion has never been a part of my life; I don't know very much but my mind is open.

Monday, March 10th, 2014, Amy Walsh:

Day 3 is complete and I am feeling a whole range of emotions. I have to say, though, that happiness is definitely dominating. Finally getting to do some hard labor today was really fulfilling. My group and I were assigned to clean up a dirt area that used to be a 10ft pile of garbage. We found a whole range of "treasures" as we cleaned (including about 500 ketchup wrappers, lots of rusted wired and even an old box of the board game dominoes). Raking the dirt and lugging garbage around was really tiring; however, having some good country music going and solid conversations flowing made the time pass quickly. I really enjoyed talking with one of the workers at Upper Sand Mountain named Joe. He is probably one of the most sarcastic, but hilarious people I have met. He was extremely different from me. What really struck me was hearing him talk about his brothers, who he does not like at all. Also, learning that he has never traveled beyond his small hometown in Georgia and Sylvania almost made me feel guilty. I've been lucky enough to travel both internationally and throughout the US. Joe, however, has not been able to have these experiences. What I am taking from this is to make sure that I make it a goal to really get to know the different people in Sylvania and make the absolute most of this experience. In addition, although I may be tired and sunburnt from working in the sun all day, I should constantly remind myself that being here is really a privilege that I should be striving to cherish at all times. Meeting Joe today and engaging in some hard work has definitely gotten me more excited to be here! I am really looking forward to what else this week holds for me.

Tuesday, March 11th, 2014, Yessenia:

If I had to describe today in one word I'd choose "relaxing." The day started off well, we even got to the site a good ten minutes before Chris, Ben, Joe and Robert.

The morning session was productive; the team I was in went to this lady's home in Flat Rock to insulate the water pipes under her house. It was really rewarding to speak to the person that was benefiting from the small act and she was extremely nice. One fast note about her location is that she lives on the border between the different time zones. Nicki had 11:36am on her phone and Mamadou had 10:36am which was pretty hard. Also, her two dogs were adorable and friendly.

After lunch, it was pretty cool to have students mix with the other members of the other team, so that there could be a good balance and equal opportunity for everyone to know each other. Whoever suggested that, I say it was a really good idea.

Before leaving the work site, I really enjoyed the relaxing time that students and administrators had. It was fun to see people play football, throw and catch the tennis ball. More specifically, the hammering session: Hayley and Hieu learned to hammer and nail which was fun to watch. Most other people joined and to me it seemed that all of us left a hammered nail in the shed that is being constructed. It made me feel like we are leaving a little piece and contribution on this new construction project.

Dinner was a very touching event. It was really nice to be hosted by the people from the church for dinner at their church. The supper was great, very delicious. Two things apart from food being tasty that made me feel really appreciated and thought of was when a man came around and personally thanked us (by table) for our work. Secondly, the service that Chris prepared for us was comfortable and welcoming, almost embracing our differences and reassuring us that we are all human beings and no discontentment should be felt within us. His service, as said by someone else, was very cultural and more of a new experience to people that might not be as familiar with a Christian service.

The day ended on a good note. Reflection time was excellent. Good discussions and thoughts were being shared, a lot that was said I agreed with and felt similar to. It was really a good reflection, and I'm so glad that people are open to talking about issues of religion, their fears and the things they have been thinking about but have not yet voiced. I'm really looking forward to the next few days, and see the growth in each one of us and as a group.

Wednesday, March 12th, 2014, (unknown):

Today has been a day of ups and downs for me, but thanks to all the positive vibes that surround me, it ended with a smile.

We spent a large majority of the day reorganizing the warehouse where Upper Sand Mountain Parish keeps their food stored as well as their donations for the store. Today the group learned the power of an assembly line! We moved a ton of boxes from one place to another which felt like little actions throughout the day but in the end it showed some really significant results. To think that the 15 of us plus their normal staff organized this much in a day is remarkable and I'm really glad we could help them out because I can't imagine how long it would have taken for Joe, Ben and Dilbert to have done it themselves.

Having my team around me today really raised my spirits and sharing lunch with members of the community was wonderful, and delicious. I never knew there were so many types of cornbread until today! During lunch there was a small service and what really struck out to me was the message that you should always stand for what you believe in, you should either be "hot or cold; never lukewarm." It brought me back to my own life and I thought about my indifference, but also how this experience is effecting my personal growth and strengthening my beliefs. In the middle of the day I received some unfortunate news but I am grateful that Nicki, Ben and Dilbert were around to make me laugh and feel better and more hopeful about my situation. I love that Ben and Dilbert took interest in my passions and were genuine when they told me I will be great. I appreciate the kindness and I feel like it's not often found back home (maybe I'm not surrounded by the best people).

I can't express how happy I am to be here and I feel like I'm using my energy in the best of ways during this break.

Wednesday, March 12th, 2014, Gary:

Today I spent the day reorganizing the warehouse. Although it was tedious work, in the end it looked much better and the staff at the parish recognized the hard work we all put in by repeatedly telling us "good job" which I, along with many other students appreciated. In addition we attended a luncheon that celebrated the time of lent in the Christian religion. I am very familiar with Christianity being raised a Roman Catholic myself. However, I did not expect this trip to be as religious oriented as it has become. Many individuals we have interacted with are much more passionate about their faith than I would have anticipated. Many referenced being blessed by God and thanking God for things that have occurred in their lives. This is not language I am familiar with in the area I grew up. I find it very interesting.

Last night we also attended a service led by Chris. It was very friendly and welcoming to people of non-Christian faiths. I think he did a very good job. What was really surprising to me was what he said to me at the end of the service. He came up to me and called where I was from and what denomination of Christianity was? I said "Pittsburgh and Roman Catholic." Then Chris said, "I could tell you knew more than what I said."

I found this very surprising. I first wondered how he could tell that I knew more. I must have been mouthing the words or something during all the prayers. After this conversation I have begun to question/ponder my faith more. I have distanced myself from the Catholic faith over the last few years and have not been close with God although I still believe in him. After this experience though I have been re-evaluating this decision and wonder if I should practice an organized religion since I do know a lot already about Christianity and I would like to have a more organized way or practicing my spirituality.

Thursday, March 13th, 2014, Sarah Koch:

Today was my favorite day yet. Some people were thrown off by the cooler weather but I wore a lot of layers and the sun was out so I was very content. I spent the morning trying (not very successfully) to clear out the thick brush in the yard of a home that the parish volunteers had built. It was frustrating not to really have the right tools, which made it hard to make progress. In the afternoon, we moved to clearing the thick dead grass that covered the entire yard, which was much more satisfying to me since it was easier to see the progress. We also played the “question game” asking each other questions or “truths” about each other’s lives and getting to know each other better- it was lovely.

We finished early, so after we got back to the house where we’re staying many of us took a serene walk. Later, I convinced Amy to go for a run with me, even though she really didn’t want to at first, and we ended up having a really nice talk. Afterward and for the rest of the night she kept thanking me for getting her to come with me.

Later we had a delicious turkey and pork burger dinner, followed by a really honest and understanding conversation about sexuality. All in all it was a really great day and it made me sad to leave.

Almost forgot that I went for a truck ride with Ben- one of the parish employees- and he told me all about his family life and hobbies. He can be quiet so I really appreciated his openness and learning about how his lifestyles is so different from mine, from hunting his own food to eat to reconstructing the entire interior of his home by himself. Just another lovely exposure to Sylvania Life.

Thursday, March 13th, 2014, Mamadou Balde:

It has been such a great experience coming on this trip and I’m amazed to how far the team has come in terms of personal growth and thoughtful reflection. Alabama has shown me a diverse and unique view of the so called “Southern Hospitality.” The people, culture and food down here are so great and I can’t measure how much happiness and gratefulness that I have gained so

far. Being on this trip with great people of different views and beliefs has challenged me to continue being open-minded and understanding and appreciating other's values and opinions. It is very memorable and eye opening to work with the parish and learn about their mission of community development and care. This has taught me to really be grateful to the things I have and made me realize how blessed my life has been. Truthfully, I would never have expected to learn so much about myself and the people I came to this trip with in such a small period of time. I'm thankful to everyone on this trip who has contributed in so many different ways to making this experience as memorable and fun as possible.

In sum, my experience on this trip would continue to challenge me on exploring/learning about other cultures and I hope to take this experience and make it a learning tool for my friends at Dickinson as well as for my family.

PS: Tonight's dinner was very delicious and I really appreciate the team's effort in the cooking process. We couldn't have enjoyed it without the willingness and kindness of Hayley and her mom in helping make the burgers. So much greatness and positive support from everyone on this trip. I thank you all for your stories and laughs, and I want to say that it has been wonderful getting to spend my break with y'all.

Friday, March 14th, 2014, Hayley White:

The last day at the parish was another wonderful one! Although it was filled with heavy hearts since we were leaving a place we all know and love now, it was still great!

I started off the day with helping Trevor make some breakfast by contributing some scrambled eggs. Then we arrived to the parish and split into groups by grabbing a partner that you hadn't worked with yet and wanted to spend time with. I worked with Amy because I have always really wanted to get to know her. Our pair was then put into Ben's group and went to the house I have been at before. This house had previously been owned by two bad families in the way that they did not take care of the service-made house that had been provided for them. It was hard because Dilbert had told us their stories and they were very emotional. However, at the house I helped (with Amy) to repaint the bathroom. We had lovely, easy conversations and she was a joy to get to know. I had never painted before so it was fun to get to do. Nicki also joined in right before lunch.

After lunch, we went to one of the other project houses and we painted again while the other group cleaned right outside too. The whole other team had cleaned around the parish and cleaned inside the building as well as the warehouse. They apparently had fun as well! Then one group went to "The Honey Pot" which is an Alabama thrift shop and picked up some things while Trevor and I went for a run. It was really nice to do that because we had been going on those every day and it was really nice to get to know him. He is such a nice guy and a true gem.

When we returned, we all had breakfast for dinner and Gary did the love guru for Mamadou which was obviously great.

In reflection, Alabama was a joy and taught me many things about myself and many good life skills (painting hammering, organizing boxes, cleaning, loading a truck, stacking palates, gardening, driving a minivan, etc.). The people I met here were so great and the people on the trip are now friends that I have at Dickinson for the rest of my time there. I have felt completely comfortable and welcomed by them all and that is a true reflection of how wonderful of people they all are. I really hope that I do get to hang out with them again at school and grow our friendships. The people here will forever be missing in my heart as well as the rest of the group- they are wonderful humans.

In closing, I have had a wonderful time and couldn't have loved it more. Sweet home Alabama has forever changed me.

Love from the bama fam.

Saturday, March 15th, 2014, Mu Mu:

It's been a long and tiring journey but we made it through. There's been more laughter and enjoy more than anything else from the group of participants and it brings great joy in my heart to see how much they have come along as a team and individuals. The most rewarding part of the journey is always the finish but not because it's the end but because it's the start of something new. I could not have asked for a better experience than to lead a team of eager students and administrators to the same location that brought so much joy to my heart in the past. With that being said I leave you with this:

We all came here as individuals, bringing our own personal styles and characteristics. We have given a part of ourselves to the group. This is what being an individual is all about. We have learned about others and also about ourselves. We are all unique pieces of the puzzle, with our thoughts, ideas, beliefs, and dreams. We are valuable because of this and what we have to offer to others.

No one is exactly like us. We need to look in ourselves, see who we are and recognize our potential. We have the ability to accomplish whatever we start out to do. Know that we have no limits and only can make things happen. Take all that you have experienced here and keep it with you.