

## A SPRING BREAK EXPERIENCE LIKE NO OTHER

Future nonprofit leaders make a difference in New Orleans

By Nicole Hadley

The words “spring break” often conjure images of a weeklong vacation on a sunny beach, far away from the stresses of college life. But ask any of the seven ASU American humanics (AH) students who completed service projects in New Orleans about their week away, and they’ll tell you that, while they didn’t spend their time on a beach, this spring break is one they will never forget.

This next generation of nonprofit leaders spent seven days in New Orleans accomplishing such tasks as:

- Demolishing a Ninth Ward nursing home.
- Cleaning up the house and yard of New Orleans resident Norman Jackson, who is slowly rebuilding his life two years after fleeing Hurricane Katrina.
- Working with Audubon Society members to restore the natural ecosystem of the wetlands.

Two-and-a-half years after Hurricane Katrina tore through New Orleans, students were amazed to discover that some areas have yet to be touched by cleanup crews.

“The most memorable experience was gutting the old St. Margaret’s assisted living facility,” says Megan Trombetta, a junior who hails from Phoenix. “It was the first work to be done on the building since the storm. It was surreal. There was a calendar on the wall for August 2005. In the boardroom there was an evacuation plan written on the dry erase board. It was as if time had just stopped.”

Students were played host to in New Orleans by Operation Nehemiah, a faith-based nonprofit organization dedicated to mobilizing people toward creating a better world. Its motto is “rebuilding the walls of people’s lives” – words that accurately capture the work they do in New Orleans.



ASU American Humanics students completed several service projects during their spring break trip to New Orleans. Front row, from left: Megan Trombetta, Candida Henriquez, Ashlie West and Lauren Dunning. Back row, from left: New Orleans resident Norman Jackson, Caitlin Gizler, Korbi Adams, Jessica Brzuskiwicz and Stacey Freeman.

KORBI ADAMS PHOTO

“As a former ASU student, I was extremely delighted that the group decided to come to help us here in New Orleans,” says Fred Franke, director of Operation Nehemiah. “They are among more than 14,000 volunteers who’ve come to work with us here in order to help in the rebuilding process of New Orleans.”

Operation Nehemiah not only housed and fed the AH group, but it also coordinated all the service projects for the students.

“Operation Nehemiah was amazing,” says Caitlin Gizler, a senior from Phoenix who is president of the AH Student Association. “They have very few resources in terms of funding, staff and space – they are struggling as much as the city – but their staff and regular volunteers are incredible. They are an organization I want to support for a very long time.”

Additionally, the group had the unique experience of working with ABC-TV’s “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition” crew to rebuild a family’s home that was damaged by Katrina’s wrath. The episode aired in the Phoenix metropolitan area March 23.

“After two-and-a-half years, they still need so much help down there to bring the city back to its former glory,” says Stacey Freeman, AH senior program coordinator. “Hav-

ing volunteers like the American humanics students is invaluable to grass-roots nonprofit organizations such as Operation Nehemiah. In just one week, we were able to change the lives of so many people.”

Gizler and Trombetta, like Freeman, were moved by their experience in New Orleans.

“This experience was beyond incredible for me,” Gizler says. “It truly changed me in one short week. It has helped me see even more how I can help create great changes in a community.”

Although their week of service is complete, these future nonprofit leaders know their work has just begun. Plans are being made to return for more service in the Big Easy.

“Experiential learning is a hallmark of the student experience in our programs,” says Robert Ashcraft, director of ASU’s Lodestar Center and professor of nonprofit studies in the School of Community Resources and Development. “The students in our American humanics program do more than learn about issues in the classroom. They engage in learning experiences such as those made possible through their work with Operation Nehemiah. Our students gain as much from the experience as those they serve.”

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