

Montpelier

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY MAGAZINE

The Kind of Passion that Doesn't Go Away

Montpelier Winter 2000



Students give new meaning to Spring Break and find life-changing experiences.

After a bleak, cold winter of homework, term papers and exams in 1996, Jordan Mallah ('99) and his friends were ready to hit the beach. He and the rest of North America's undergraduates, who each spring break converge on the continent's warmest and sunniest spots in an annual ritual of self-indulgence.

Mallah picked Orlando, where hordes of students sunbathe, swim and tour Disney World by day and club-hop by night, returning to their hotel rooms in the wee hours to sleep the morning away.

Cavalier, carefree, rambunctious. The ultimate spring break. Or so it seemed.

The following spring, Mallah headed for Florida once again. But this time he and a group of JMU students planted trees in Tallahassee for the Nature Conservancy. He never looked back. The next year, Mallah and friends spent their winter break in a Harlem soup kitchen and homeless shelter. On their arrival, they made after-midnight deliveries through Manhattan, distributing blankets, soup and hot chocolate to the homeless. The temperature was below zero.

He found that these service trips gave him something his traditional spring break experience didn't - a lasting sense of fulfillment.



Above: 10 JMU students made after-midnight deliveries through Manhattan, distributing blankets, soup, and hot chocolate to the homeless.

Below: Perched in the rafters during a 1997 trip, Lauren Hohman helped construct a Habitat home in Flint River, Ga.

Since then, all of his spring breaks and some of his summer and winter breaks have been spent volunteering with other JMU students. In Uganda. The Caribbean. Ghana.

Mallah says he has no illusions about saving the world. It's too unwieldy a task. He just wants to make some sort of difference.

"I think people going on these trips think they're going to make a big change and then realize in one week, you can't make a huge change in peoples' situations," he explains. "It's something small, but it's a start, and it does have an impact."

An increasing number of JMU students are doing the same, opting for service projects over the clichéd collegiate spring break lounging on the beach.

Through JMU's Alternative Spring Break, students can spend their weeklong vacation volunteering - helping in a residential facility for those in the final stages of AIDS; building homes in a poor district of Miami; assisting in a community center for a Native American population on the marshy Louisiana bayou.

The trips go as far away as the Caribbean island of Dominica and as close as Jonesville, an Appalachian Mountain community in far southwest Virginia. While most of the trips are during spring break, there are one or two annual winter trips, and a summer alumni trip is in the works.

The momentum is building. Alternative spring break trips at JMU have become increasingly more popular since the first trip was organized eight years ago.

The number of trips has doubled in three years, and participating in one has become competitive. The morning of the annual sign-up day in November, students line up early - and some arrive before sunrise to get a number so they'll be among the first to sign up for a trip.

Last year, students' participation landed JMU a spot on the "Top 10 Activist Schools," an annual ranking done by the San Francisco-based magazine Mother Jones.

In 1998, JMU's program received the Program of the Year Award from Break Away, a national organization started by Vanderbilt University students to promote community service on college campuses.

The apparent resurgence in social consciousness is building on college campuses nationwide. More and more students are opting to spend their spring breaks helping those in need rather than on the beaches of Florida or Cancun, says Break Away's director, Rachel Tolman.

These are the sons and daughters of the peace generation. The children of the seventies. "Generation X." Supposedly self-absorbed. Apolitical. Lazy. Apathetic.

"There is that segment of people who could care less about what we're doing, but there is also a segment of people who want to give their lives to this," Tolman says.

Somewhere in the middle, perhaps, lie the majority of the JMU students who choose alternative spring breaks.

The trips, students say, put them in situations where they learn to connect with people in a different culture or lifestyle, shed stereotypes, and see them as just people much like themselves.

The experience causes some students to reflect on what they consider important in the larger scheme of life. And that can be easy to lose sight of in the day-to-day routine of college life.

Though their experiences differ, there is one thing that most say they discover about volunteering: Their gift becomes their gain.

"We're helping the people, but they're helping us much more, is what we all realize," says Mallah.

Inevitably, during the trips, there are those moments, the epiphanies when the purpose of the trip becomes the most clear and cultural barriers fall away.

Mallah recalls one of those moments. It happened on their last day at the Harlem soup kitchen. A man stood up at the end of lunch and said how surprised and appreciative he was that a group of college students from Virginia would venture into Harlem to try to help him and others better themselves.

"Then we stood up and said how much of a difference they made in our lives."

There was a certain indescribable energy in the room at that moment. One that seemed to lift the barriers between the students and the homeless they had served.

"At the beginning of the week, we looked at them as crack and heroine addicts. At the end of the week, we looked at them as good friends," Mallah recalls.

It's those kinds of changes in perspective that students returning from the trips talk about. Seeing life in a different way because they left the comfort zone of campus and immersed themselves in an entirely different world for a week.

What attracts a lot of college students to the alternative spring break trips is they are seeking to be part of something beyond themselves, a community, says John Grace, JMU's Catholic Campus minister, who helped start the program.

"I think students are hungering for a meaningful experience. ... There's this perception out there that life is simply about you do this, this and this, and it all comes together. You get into a good college, to get a good job, to settle down. And that's life. Students are saying 'I hope there's something more to do.' "

The first alternative spring break trip was organized by Grace and Presbyterian Campus minister Rick Hill. In the spring of 1992, a group of about 60 JMU students drove to Homestead, Fla., to help repair homes ravaged by Hurricane Andrew.

was the case then the return is much like culture shock. They plunge back into college life with about a month left before the end of the semester. Everything that was stressful to them before the trip seems almost trivial, like a grade in a class. Even finals.

The jarring transition back to school is why the students who go on the trips have a few group meetings after they return. It's often hard for them to relate to others' tales of spring break escapades.

"Everyone is talking about Cancun and this party and that bar. It's really hard to talk to them," says Kathleen Houser ('00).

After spending a spring break at a homeless shelter in Florida, Houser ('00) remembers feeling so appreciative of everything she had. And a little guilty.

"I was thinking 'I'm going back to my dorm with a T.V, a phone and running water.' I just wanted to give all of my energy to helping people. But I had classes. I couldn't just put everything else on hold."

She tried to explain to her friends how her spring break made such a difference in her life. They were skeptical. They questioned how one week could have done that. How it could have been that intense.

It was for Houser, she says. The trip inspired her to continue her volunteer efforts during future spring breaks and some summers. She now coordinates JMU's Alternative Spring Break Program.

The yearning to serve, Houser insists, is not just a phase. It's not something she expects she'll grow out of when she graduates.

"That kind of passion," she says, "just doesn't go away."

So too with Mallah. He graduated in December and is traveling around the world with a ticket that will allow him to stop in nine countries. In each, he will assist Peace Corps volunteers or link up with other service projects.

When the nearly year abroad is over, he expects he will return to find a job, perhaps in computer science or with a non-profit organization.

Even then, as a part of the working world, he does not expect his commitment to service to flag.

"It keeps my life in perspective," Mallah says. "It makes me realize how much I have to learn from the world. From people."

Story by Alayna DeMartini

Photos by Alternative Spring Break Participants