

# More students are discovering spring break is for caring

## Alternatives to fun in the sun can uncover passions

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John Thomas, a second-year medical student at Florida State University, has big plans for spring break.

He'll wake up around 7 a.m. in a small Panamanian village, hop in a truck and ride over a rugged road for two hours until he reaches an even more remote village. As he descends from the vehicle, the village leader will come to greet him and the children will swarm around, embracing him in spontaneous hugs.

Thomas will spend the day interviewing a long line of patients — most of whom don't have a regular doctor — even though he knows little Spanish. He might assist with draining an abscess, taking a pap smear or assessing someone's anxiety or depression.

Then it's back in the truck, arriving in the original village for dinner — often a chicken that had been scratching around the yard earlier in the day and is now being cooked over an outdoor fire pit.

*Juliana Matthews helps separate bags that will be filled with aspirin. / Joseph La Belle/Democrat*



Thomas did all this last spring break with other medical school students from FSUCares, and on Saturday he returned to Panama to do it again. He's anxious to see everybody, including several people who have access to the village's one computer and have been keeping up with him on Facebook.

Thomas, president of FSUCares, is one of dozens of Tallahassee college students traveling as far as El Salvador and Ghana and as near as the Gulf Coast and South Florida this week to immerse themselves in different cultures and provide goods and services to people in need. Examples include:

- Sixteen students from FSUCares, a medical-student organization devoted to helping underserved and underprivileged populations, are working with people in Panama, Immokalee, and towns along the Texas-Mexico border.
- Almost 50 students from FSU's Alternative Breaks Program, who are going to El Salvador and six cities in the United States, are doing everything from rebuilding a hospital and maintaining a state park to planting a community garden and teaching immigrant children.
- Six students from Florida A&M University are on a cultural immersion trip in Ghana that will include a visit to El Mina Castle on the Cape Coast, the site where thousands of people were sold into slavery in the 17th century.

Cost for the trips varies, from \$300 to \$3,000. Many of the groups have held fundraisers throughout the year to cover some or all of the expenses.



Students and the faculty who often accompany them say students return from these trips changed people.

"When I came back," Thomas said, "I was so ready to make a difference here."

Yussif Kokurugu, a sociology professor at FAMU who has led the Ghana spring break trip for several years, said students also come back determined to continue their education.

*Ryan Howard sorts through soaps and shampoos in preparation for a spring break service trip. Howard is part of FSUCares, a Florida State University organization that is sending 16 students to three different sites to deliver medicine and supplies and to perform basic medical services. / Joseph La Belle/Democrat*

"I have so many letters telling me how these trips helped them in their lives," he said. "They want to stay in school and do well."

Pushkala Raman, who formerly worked at FSU and is now an associate professor of marketing at Texas Woman's University, studied the impact of alternative breaks on college students in 2001. She found students who were not interested in social problems beforehand didn't change much after the trips. But students who were became better citizens afterward, including becoming more knowledgeable about issues and increasing their involvement in the community.

"What alternative breaks show (these students) is how to do it, the results that they can achieve," Raman said.

The most successful projects also are ones that provide ample time for student reflection, says Clayton Hurd, director of public service research at the Haas Center for Public Service at Stanford University. In 2006, he reviewed the literature on the effectiveness of service learning.

Reflection activities "build a bridge" between theory and practice and help students recognize the lessons they've learned that might otherwise get missed, he wrote.

That's why today, most people who go on service learning trips keep a daily journal and later write a longer essay on their experiences. They might also talk about their experiences in public.

Catherine Lampi, who is on schedule to graduate in April with a degree in International Affairs, said she got hooked on alternative breaks the summer after her freshman year. Since then she's been on six more trips and is currently the site leader coordinator.

This week she'll be in Little Rock, Ark., to work with Heifer International on hunger issues.

"The beauty of alternative breaks is that they're composed of so many aspects," Lampi said. She met wonderful people, became knowledgeable about issues, learned to work in a team, and became a leader.

"After each one," she said, "I've learned something about myself."

One of her most memorable trips was to a community in Spain that housed poor people with HIV/AIDS, drug and alcohol addictions and other problems.

She wrote in her reflection: "When I came here I thought I would like the people I was with, but I never thought I would love them ... Linda is from Nigeria and moved to Spain to try and support her son, she has no family now. She calls me sister, I work with (her) every day, showering, dressing, helping with meals, etc. and for the first time in my life I feel like I am where I am supposed to be, working with the cause I am meant to be working with."

In Tallahassee, Lampi has gotten involved in HIV/AIDS education and hopes to one day get a job in health planning.

"I wouldn't have learned I was passionate about this issue without the alternative breaks trips," she said.

Jeva St. Fort, who graduated with a psychology degree from FAMU in the fall, said she jumped at the chance to go to Ghana during last year's spring break.

"I wanted to see how African people lived over there compared to here," she said.

What she saw stirred her deeply.

"By the end of every day, I was emotional," she said. "Seeing mothers carrying their children and still work in the hot environment was overwhelming."

Going to the slave castle was also humbling. Only a few of her fellow travelers ventured into the small room that included the "Door of No Return," a narrow portal that the slaves went through before being shipped across the Atlantic Ocean.

"When we were up in that room, we had a moment of silence," St. Fort said. "I broke down crying."

The experience made her determined to do more with her life. Since she's returned, she's volunteered for a crisis hot line and is improving her diet in order to be an example to others.

No one knows how students will change after their spring break trips this year. But perhaps someday they'll tell us, not only with their words, but with their deeds.

*To view a video of FSUCares students packing supplies for their spring break trips, visit [www.tallahassee.com](http://www.tallahassee.com).*