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Cal Poly Students Lend a Hand in New Orleans Over Spring Break

SAN LUIS OBISPO – Fifteen Cal Poly students spent their Spring Break in New Orleans helping residents as they continue to rebuild and recover from Hurricane Katrina.

The students tutored children in kindergarten through eighth grades and painted water-damaged areas at the McDonogh Charter School in New Orleans' Tremé neighborhood – which experienced moderate flooding in the wake of the 2005 hurricane. The students also helped at an animal shelter and a soup kitchen.

The trip, which took place March 21-27, was organized through Cal Poly's Alternative Breaks, a program that gives students an opportunity to travel and donate their time during their academic breaks. The Cal Poly students worked through a nonprofit group in New Orleans called Relief Spark. The students spent four days volunteering, taking a fifth day to explore and experience the city.

This was the third Alternative Breaks trip Cal Poly students have made to New Orleans. All of the participants on the 2009 trip were visiting New Orleans for the first time.

"It was a great experience that opened my eyes to what happened with Hurricane Katrina," said Rachel Beress, a fifth year Environmental Engineering major. "We were able to help the people at the soup kitchen by providing them with food, but it was also really great to hear their stories. Many talked about evacuating after the hurricane and mentioned coming back to no jobs or homes.

"And it was a shock to hear there are still about 5,000 children homeless after Katrina. That made me realize there is still a lot of attention to be focused on New Orleans."

With the New Orleans trip complete, Cal Poly's Alternative Breaks program is looking forward to two trips this summer.

Cal Poly student and Alternative Breaks coordinator Lori Atwater is organizing a trip to the United Arab Emirates, set for August. Participants plan to meet with education officials there to discuss initiatives being implemented to increase the number of women involved in higher education. The group also hopes to identify possible projects for Cal Poly students to collaborate with students at universities in UAE.

Meanwhile, student and Alternative Breaks coordinator Jody Weseman – who led the recent New Orleans trip – is planning a summer trip to Mexico (possibly Oaxaca) to study community development and indigenous rights.

For more information on Cal Poly's Alternative Breaks program, call 805-756-5388 or send e-mail to



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