

TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Spring break trip builds home, character for Pittsburgh, Greensburg students

By Mary Pickels
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Spring break in Florida doesn't always mean a week of partying on the beach.

For two groups of students from the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg and LaRoche College, it meant a week of physical labor.

With hammers and screwdrivers, shingles and plywood, they put in a 40-hour week working on a Habitat for Humanity house in Walton County, Fla.

Eight students from each school, along with Brian Root, UPG campus resident director, and Bryan Valentine, LaRoche College director of housing and residence life, participated in Habitat for Humanity's Collegiate Challenge.

It was Melissa Wojtaszek's second trip, and she's already planning her third.

"I couldn't imagine spending spring break any other way," said the junior, who is president of the UPG Habitat chapter.

In addition to acquiring life skills, she said, it's an inexpensive way to spend the break.

Each student paid \$100 to participate. Additional expenses were covered by year-round fundraising.

The students stayed at a retreat center and worked on the house from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. for five days.

They got to meet the single mom who will live in the house with her 14-year-old son.

"She was very nice, very appreciative," Wojtaszek said.

"This was the first opportunity a lot of our members had to build," Root said.

They managed to have a little fun in the evening, he said, enjoying a movie or a round of miniature golf.

Valentine was formerly employed in a similar position at UPG. He, Root and Wojtaszek serve as board members of Central Westmoreland Habitat for Humanity.

While at UPG he got students involved in the county's efforts and started paperwork for that school's chapter. Before leaving UPG last year, Valentine booked both schools to go to Walton County during this year's spring break.

"The spring breaks were the same week," Valentine said. "I figured I would be able to get (LaRoche) kids interested in community service to go. A lot of students like the opportunity to use their spring breaks to help."

Bill Rennie, construction chairman for the Walton County Habitat chapter, said the students did a "fantastic job."

"Their week better than cut in half the time until the family can be in the home," he said. "They just gave us a huge boost, and made a huge difference."

Because volunteers normally work only twice a week, the students' donated labor amounted to eight weeks of work, Rennie said.

"They were very good at what they did," he said.

"It was the best year since I got started," Valentine said of his third trip to Walton County.

On their drive down, the LaRoche group found another chance to help a community in need. Passing through Enterprise, Ala., days after a March 1 tornado killed eight high school students, they came across a site sponsored by a radio station for donors to drop off supplies.

They unanimously decided to donate about \$300 that they planned to spend on entertainment and "extras" while in Florida.

"That speaks volumes about the students," Valentine said.

Mary Pickels can be reached at mpickels@tribweb.com or (724) 836-5401.

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