

Breaking away: College students bypass the beaches to volunteer

BY GIGI LEHMAN

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Michigan college student Lindsay Nisbett and 25 pals from Grand Valley State University toss their empty paper cups on the ground as their weeklong South Florida spring break draws to a close. The trip has involved plenty of drinking, toplessness and even some wet T-shirts -- but *Girls Gone Wild* filmmakers would have no interest in this group of Habitat for Humanity volunteers. The drinking? Lots of water to fight off dehydration. Shirts optional? Sure, for the guys working up on the roofs. Wet T-shirts? Sweating will do that to you.

'When I first told people I was coming to Miami to build houses, a lot of them said, 'This is your spring break, why not enjoy it?' " Nisbett said. 'But I thought, 'I can get drunk in Allendale; why not come here and make a difference in someone's life?' "

Although plenty of collegians are still flocking this month to hot spots like Cancún, Mexico, or South Padre Island, Texas, Nisbett is part of another trend. Thousands of students are bypassing the beach in favor of volunteer projects.

"I have seen a greater interest among students in community building and social justice over the past 10 years," said Robert Hogner, director of civic engagement for Florida International University's College of Business Administration. "The messages that come to students from the White House, from college admissions counselors, from corporate employers, is that service is becoming a more important part of life."

According to Break Away, a Tallahassee-based organization that helps organize what have come to be known as "alternative spring breaks," more than 35,000 students will take part in their programs this year. That figure doesn't include trips sponsored by other organizations, such as Habitat for Humanity.

And while Florida is a popular destination for "alternative spring breakers" (nothing says you can't come back feeling virtuous *and* looking tan), students from South Florida schools are headed to the airports as well:

- At Barry University, more than 30 students are taking part in two spring break trips. One group is going to New York City to help the homeless; the second is traveling to Greenville, S.C., to work at a group home that uses animal-assisted therapy to treat abused adolescent girls.
- At the University of Miami, nine student-led trips involve participants in issues ranging from informing farm workers of their rights in Texas border towns to working on improving access to the Cumberland Trail in Tennessee. Sixty-four students are taking part.
- Palm Beach Atlantic University, a Christian institution in West Palm Beach, is pairing up with Miami-based Latin America Mission to send 14 students to help rebuild hurricane-damaged homes in the Cayman Islands.
- And at Florida International University, 22 International Business Honor Society students are traveling to Bangkok to run a day camp for impoverished children and work with women with AIDS and those who have been forced into prostitution.

DIVERSE GROUP

Since the International Business Honors Program requires a service project for graduation, "it was perfect to have an international project," said Natalia Sturla, student leader for the trip.

The project is international in more than one sense: None of the FIU students going on the trip is "a white American," Sturla said. "That's going to be very interesting: to see how [the Thai people] react to us when they might be expecting someone like Professor Hogner -- tall, white, blond, with blue eyes."

"Our business education is lacking in the human aspect," she continued. "We know accounting, we know finance, but I don't think we're ready to go out into the world and use our knowledge to fix problems. Companies are starting to realize this and are dealing with it with codes of ethics and corporate social responsibility. I think it's very important for us as students to get a hands-on experience with this."

LEADERSHIP SKILLS

Hogner, who is accompanying the students to Thailand, agreed that "colleges and employers are looking for someone who has a broader view of the world

around them, a broader base from which to make decisions. It also has to do with the leadership qualities that a project like this enhances."

He notes that students are motivated to take part in alternative spring break trips for varying reasons, ranging from the altruistic (doing good works) to the pragmatic (it's required for graduation and looks good on a résumé).

"The key to having a good service experience," he said, "is to take some whose natural instinct is to help others and some who find that part of themselves while serving."

Ben Harris, a senior at Palm Beach Atlantic who has been on several volunteer trips abroad, has already found that out.

"I don't think you fully experience life until you go somewhere with a mentality of giving instead of receiving and visit another culture, not as a tourist, but to see how they live and how you can affect the situation," he said.