Alternative Spring Break: Volunteering with Operation Breakthrough

By Eunice Ajambo ’06

This past spring break a group of six ethnically diverse Carleton students headed off to Kansas City, MO., to volunteer with Operation Breakthrough at the St. Vincent’s Family Service Center. This adventure is -- hopefully-- to become an annual tradition sponsored by the Office of Multicultural Affairs. Before departure, the students, including site leader Eunice Ajambo ’06 (African), sophomores Jade Hoyer (Pacific Islander and Caucasian) and Cassie Young (Black American), and freshmen Sam Estes (Chicano Caucasian), Kace Fujiwara (Japanese American) and Wendy Jin (Chinese American) had envisioned diverse goals for their time at Operation Breakthrough. But, at the end of the volunteer program the pervasive sentiment was that social justice was clearly lacking in our society and that things needed to change.

In comparison to well-known Alternative Spring Break destinations including Florida, Missouri was an unconventional destination for a volunteer project and so was the site, St. Vincent’s Family Service Center. Since its institution in 1971, the mission of the St. Family Service Center is to “help children who are living in poverty develop to their fullest potential by providing them a safe, loving and educational environment.” The program began with 50 infants, toddlers and preschoolers, and today, more than 400 children of ages 6 weeks to 14 years old pass through the doors of the day care center each day. All but 2% of the enrolled families live below federal poverty guidelines. About 25% of the children come from homeless or battered women’s shelters. About 25% come from foster homes. The rest live primarily with single mothers who struggle to support them on annual earnings that are often not more than $10,000. The organization also supports and empowers the children's families through advocacy, referral services and emergency aid. With a mere staff of sixty and cut backs on funding by the state and the federal governments, heavy reliance upon private donations and volunteer labor force are essential components of the day care center’s daily operations.

For the volunteering Carleton students, a normal day consisted of immersing themselves in the routine of the city and the volunteer site. The students usually took public transportation through the inner-city to the volunteer site. At the day care center, two students worked in pods with children aged between six weeks and two years old; two more students worked with children aged two to three years and the other two worked in classrooms with four to five year olds. The students also helped out in the clinic, the clothing closet, the food pantry, the library, and with tutoring of school-age children.

One week during spring break may not be enough to make sustainable improvement in the lives of the children that the group

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served, but from one teacher’s statement that, “I just want you to know that we really appreciate you being here. You give us a chance to get work done that we normally wouldn’t be able to do”, the participants ended up feeling that they had made a difference in the lives of the children and of the employees.

On our campus, rarely do students find themselves in unfamiliar locations with the common aim of having shared experiences. The idea for this trip stemmed from an interest to have diverse groups of students to travel and volunteer at given destinations with the aim of giving back to the community. The students would learn about each other. They would also learn about and with the communities they serve and then use service as a springboard from which to initiate dialogue about social justice issues. During the trip, reaching this goal was complimented by group activities that revolved around getting to know each other and reflecting on the students’ experiences at the day care center. Learning was a daily adventure in which students challenged their own and each others’ ideas. The hope is that this initiative can proceed to enrich the lives of members of the campus community in the spirit of service learning and multiculturalism.

Student Reflections from Operation Breakthrough

“The cycle of poverty is just that and it continues. We can point fingers and call out names but that won’t help these kids. This generation is at risk and already their children are in danger. We have to decide what to do right now to start something for all our futures. We have to create a cycle of compassion to combat poverty. This is not a good deed for the day. This is an effort to aid, to conserve, to save, to protect, to cherish, to love humanity” - Kace ’08

“One of the most profound moments I had on this trip happened when I was riding the bus to the center. The ride was about 15-20min. long and about five to eight minutes into it I noticed this middle-aged man getting onto the bus. He paid his fair and turned to walk to his seat – the moment he turned he was facing me, and our eyes met. My eyes stayed with him, stayed with his eyes until he sat down and turned away from me. I was mesmerized by what I saw in face, the things his eyes revealed to me. I felt my soul and my entire being stand still. In that moment, on the bus, I regretted any judgment I was arrogant enough to pass on anyone in that community. Instead I was humbled. As a group we asked ourselves “what needs to be done?” The conclusion was that the environment needed to change - but who would change it? What empowers a hopeless people to rise up against the system that degrades, denies and consistently dehumanizes them? That is where my thoughts are at now. Instead of being sad, I want to develop myself enough to be willing to sacrifice my privilege and go into a community like that, with others like me, and help spark change. You know, “be the change you want to see” type thing” - Cassie ’07

“Wow. Ms. Helen! She came back! She came back!” The three year olds had just woken up from their naps.

“Of course she did, she belongs here.” Ms. Helen, the classroom teacher responded. Hers was the nicest compliment I had received in a long time, and Ms. Helen’s and the other workers at Operation Breakthrough’s compassion, both towards myself and the children, and dedication for their work, is what amazed me most about our stay in Kansas City. While I was promising myself to write my kindergarten teacher a maudlin thank you letter and never to have children at now. Instead of being sad, I want to develop myself enough to be willing to sacrifice my privilege and go into a community like that, with others like me, and help spark change. You know, “be the change you want to see” type thing”. - Cassie ’07

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could muster up by noon. They were wholly dedicated to the purpose of the center, to giving the families in the area a safe environment for their kids. From my own limited experiences at Operation Breakthrough, their passion, while it impresses me to no end, doesn’t surprise me. The kids there deserve everything the center could offer them and more” - Jade ’07

“The most difficult experience for me during the trip was when I ate dinner at Brother Lewis’s Holy Family House. The sort of people I ate dinner with at the Holy Family House were the sort of people that I have been taught to fear, to distrust, and to not associate myself with. On the car ride to Greyhound station the night we left, I experienced a clear example of the general suspicion that people have towards disheveled strangers, especially those who are men of color. As we were driving through the poverty-stricken downtown area toward the bus station, Sister Theresa said something like ‘See, this isn’t a very safe neighborhood’ as we passed a group a scruffy-looking African American men who were walking in front of a convenience store. Why did she see the commonplace actions of these strangers as indicative of the danger of the neighborhood?

At the hospitality house I experienced a strong cognitive dissonance as I ate dinner. On the one hand, I felt a desire to put on a façade of toughness as I talked with these poverty-stricken strangers and to only discuss superficial things since, of course these wretched, hopeless people would not be able to discuss anything of any significance. On the other hand, my Christian and humanitarian values demanded that I see these people as children of God and as human beings completely worthy of being respected and treated with dignity and that I take the risk of being open with myself with these strangers regardless of the costs to me. If I were not a complete hypocrite, I would have to throw away all of my stereotypes of poverty-stricken adults, see them as they are for both their good and not so good qualities, and accept them for who they are.

Working with the children felt like child’s play compared to this encounter. Despite their failings, the children had so many redeeming qualities, which made it very easy for me to stay sympathetic when dealing with them. Although I would guess that these people had more good qualities than the stereotypes about them give them credit for, their redeeming qualities were certainly not as obvious to me as the children’s were, which made it more difficult to maintain a sympathetic attitude toward them. This raised another issue for me. There are some sectors of the population that are marginalized yet evoke sympathy – such as poverty-stricken children – while there are other groups that marginalized but do not evoke sympathy – such as the parents of these children or those imprisoned. If it is difficult to get society to help the likable marginalized, how difficult must it be to get society to help the unlikable marginalized?” – Sam ’08

Students hanging out on the Alternative Spring Break trip. From left to right: Sam Estes ‘08, Cassie Young ’07, Eunice Ajambo ’06, Jade Hoyer ’07, Kace Fujiwara ’08, and Wendy Jin ’08 (laying).
I’m sitting here in my office on Ground Scoville, close to midnight, staring at the monitor, wondering how to get my head around some things.

My struggle is that with all I’ve experienced on Thursday afternoon, words seem woefully inadequate for what really needs to be written. In moments like this, I think of Martha D. Jones, Hudlin, my Dad, and Carolyn Fure-Slocum, who have a gift of knowing just what to say, at precisely the right time, and I wish I had that kind of talent, right now (I strongly encourage you all to make time to visit with Carolyn, you’ll be happy you did). I think of Cindy, Khullani, Kayeen, and Corey, who can enthral an audience with the written and spoken word, and how I’d love to be able to offer testimony they way those young warriors can. I think of Andrew, who’ll fire out a litany of polysyllabic words that can pummel the unsuspecting listener like a young Muhammad Ali.

But, tonight, at this moment, what gets me to smile to myself, is Kristen, who, on countless occasions, would look up from her desk and laughingly remind me (especially during spring term), while speaking about no one, and everyone, “anyone can be re-placed.” I think of Clayton, who rightfully challenged everything, who raised awareness on campus and elevated the integrity of the MCA Office in general. Yeah, and I definitely remember Clayton riding Big John! I think of Choua, who visited me late one evening in my office as she was passing through to vent about a recent CSA budget decision. I think of Samantha, who brought the tone of my interview to a new level of intensity when she told me about her struggles, and asked me exactly what I was going to do here if I was hired. I think of my first MPL retreat, and wondering if they would follow my lead with this somewhat experimental mentoring program, with our Thursday 8:30AM, two full hour, weekly meetings. I’m thinking of Yam Ki, and our 1-1’s during his first year. I think of Hubert and Stacy during an MPL meeting, advocating for their advisees so passionately that the team began to take sides. I think of Saad, Niaz, Harinder, and Natchiket, teaching me how to play cricket. I think of Ivie’s singing, Matthew’s tattoo’s, David’s poems, and WeSpeak but Who Listens. I think of CaraJoy, Hannah, Margi, Anna, Kurt, Angela, Kizzy, Sonya, Sinele, and the culture house residents who have worked hard to make the houses a safe space.

I think of the Pre-freshman Math and Science Program, and the students all plunging into the fountain at ValleyFair in 2000, because the temperature that day must have been 120 degrees. I think of the bond that exists between these participants, the connection I have with them, that they have with the office, and how unfortunate it is for the College that we will go through another summer without the PMSP.

I think of Nataly, Brisa, Sam, Marlene, and Kristine. I think of (small) Paul, who took me golfing for 18 holes on the same sweltering day Korey Stringer died of heat stroke. I think of (big) Paul, and his quiet demeanor. I think of the opportunities for international travel and how I never would have left North America were it not for Carleton. I think of the first MPL team I hired, and how they all hugged in a large circle in Great Space after the SALT Reception in May 2001, and told themselves, that, “this is the first time we’re together and I’m glad it’s not the last.” I think of Sasheen, running towards me in front of ASIA House, to share with me the terrible news that we lost Paul Wellstone. I think of walking into my office on 9-11-01, with Kaaren and Kristen telling me they heard on the radio that someone flew a plane into the World Trade Center, and me thinking it must be a radio hoax, and that someone needed to be fired. I think of watching the entire Daytona 500, turning off the TV after the winners crossed the finish line, coming into work on Monday, and falling into a stunned silence when Kristen told me about Dale Earnhardt.

I think of Kelly, who educated the masses at Chili Night that, “tolerance is not acceptance,” and the room fell silent...and remained silent...I think of Eunice and Jumal debating at the SpeakEasy. I think of Warm Fuzzies at the Posse Plus 2003 Retreat. I think of Melissa coming into work one morning, telling us about how she ran Hubert down and playfully beat him with his own shoe. Hubert, and Tayo, bless em all, often fell prey to numerous practical jokes at the hands of Melissa, Keishonda, Filmona, and Helen, and these men took the jokes in such good spirits. I think of me and Andrew beating Corey and Elisha in 2-2 basketball.....TWICE!

I think of Chris stepping up, bigtime, in BSA meetings, and for being a master choreographer already… of Peter getting UMOJA up and running, in the face of tremendous adversity… I think of Naja and Love in INAAAS, I think of Anthony’s 5 languages, Hector’s farmer’s hat, Eunice’s and Maya’s eardrum-rupturing screams. I think of Jessie, Latrice, Sheri and of Vatesha, and I hope that they are well... I think of Chris’s skills on the basketball court. I think of my many conversations with Tiffany, with Louis, and my catch-up lunches with Lesley once each term, and of Paulina, Nosipho, Pam, Ross, Viet Ly, Katie, Lisa, Erica, Anya, Domineke, and Daniel.

I am thinking of all the Men in the Men of Color Retreats….every retreat…often… I am thinking of the affection shown to me by those of you who attended my going away party, and how I’ve never felt anything so powerful. And to those of you who replied to my email, and to those who just came into say good luck… I cannot even begin to express my gratitude and my appreciation.

I am thinking of all the individuals who I know well, who I have not mentioned here, and hoping that you know that it’s not
I am thinking of shout outs, to the MPLs and MPAs from 2000-2005. Leslie, Sonya, Mike, Andrew Michelle, Mary, Samantha, Stacey, Filmona, Sasheen, Yam Ki, Keishonda, Yasuyo, Hubert, Marc-Anthony, Alexis, Anthony, Imran, Aarati, Pedro, Lykoung, Francesca, Ameelah, Milo, Oyebanke, Andrew, Amy, Hector, Alisa, Erin, Cassie, Hikaru, Nakina, Saad, Corey, Emmanuel, Jean, Andrew (wow, we had an Andrew on nearly every team), Choua, Asha, Amina, Melissa, Kamini, Ainsley, Song, Sheri, Khullani, Mokerah, Cindy, Ali, Eunice, John, you have been excellent stewards, mentors, and leaders, and I wish you well on your journey.

On April 7th-10th, six Carleton students from the Coalition of Hmong Students attended the 10th Annual Hmong National Development (HND) conference in Fresno, California. This year’s theme entitled “The Hmong American Experience: Celebrating 30 Years of Progress” centered on the social and cultural growth of the Hmong since their arrival in the U.S. The conference also addressed the anticipation of the incoming Hmong refugees from the Wat Tham Krabok refugee camp in Thailand. The conference brought together more than 700 Hmong scholars, activists, artists, and professionals from all over the nation.

Hmong National Development is a national non-profit organization which works with local and national organizations, public and private entities, and individuals to promote educational opportunities. It also strives to increase community capacity and to develop resources for the well-being, growth, and full participation of the Hmong in society.

The conference lasted for 4 days, with a pre-conference forum for educators and the premiere of the first Hmong Art Summit Exhibition on Thursday. Friday and Saturday were devoted to the education and awareness of a plethora of issues and workshops presented by professionals, graduate students, and even high school student panels. Some workshops included Behind No Child Left Behind: Hmong English Learners in California, Hmong/Mong American High School Students’ Voices and Experiences, and How to Start and Grow a Successful Career in Business.

The workshops were valuable in that they instilled a greater identity of who Hmong people are in American society and what they can do about their presence and roles in the United States. In addition, the workshops also explored how issues can affect the Hmong as well as how the Hmong can influence the way these issues are dealt with. The workshops also encouraged physical and mental motivation and skills to further develop the participants back in their home settings.

The energetic and motivational atmosphere of the conference left us anxiously awaiting next year’s conference. The conference helped us grow both mentally and in character. We are motivated to strengthen our role in the community and to increase awareness of issues facing the larger Hmong-American community. Aside from the powerful and mentally-invigorating workshops, we were still able to have some fun in the not-as-warm-as-Minnesota California sun!
By Cindy Lys ’07

Some of you have heard the name floating around this campus, some of you may have a friend, or a friend of a friend, who knows someone in Posse. About forty of you are in Posse. So, what’s it all about? The Posse Foundation is a Leadership-Merit Scholarship program whose sites are located in the heart of several cities in the United States: Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., and New York. Four years ago, Carleton College became a partner school with Posse Chicago and will this year be graduating its first Posse.

Each year Carleton College has a Posse Plus Retreat during spring term as a part of the Posse Program. The mission behind the retreat was developed as a way to have a greater impact on the campus by reaching out to students who are not themselves Posse Scholars. This year Carleton completed its fourth retreat which was held from April 1-3, and had an attendance of about 80-100 Carleton students. Posse Scholars and Posse Plus were bused to a middle-of-the-woods location to participate in discussions, workshops and games that were structured around this year’s topic: “Politics is Personal: Social Politics at Carleton”. I remember a comment made by a Posse Plus student as we first settled down for the two-hour bus ride, “There are so many cool people here that I’ve always wanted to talk to!” And thus, some of the goals behind The Posse Plus Retreat are to provide the safe space for students to come together who may not normally interact with each other. The retreat also provides for an appropriate and encouraging setting for conversations to happen on a large scale. Conversations that have relevancy on international, national, community and personal levels, which then focus on bringing the impact of these conversations and personal connections back to the campus. The diversity and personality of those involved shone through these interactive workshops.

For more information about the Posse Foundation or about the Posse Plus Retreat talk to someone with a Posse T-shirt on or visit the website at: http://possefoundation.org/.
On January 26th, the fourth annual Monster Diversity Leadership Program (DLP) began accepting student applications for each of its six weekend events, to be held this summer in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Baltimore, Dallas and Atlanta. Students interested in building leadership skills and jump-starting their post-collegiate career, may now apply online at www.monsterdlp.com to earn their spot in this FREE event. Last year, over 18,000 students applied to attend these exciting events, while we could only accept the top 1,800 from across the nation!

By Ali Khaki ’07

Dr. Joseph White, a pioneer in the field of African American psychology from California, recently visited Carleton College. During his brief stay at Carleton, Dr. White gave a presentation in the Library Athenaeum and held an informal discussion session with students at Stimson house.

Dr. White is the author of The Psychology of Blacks: An African-American Perspective, The Troubled Adolescent, and Black Man Emerging. His life work has been spent discovering and studying the psychology of black men.

In his lecture, Dr. White captivated the crowd with his good-natured humor while articulating his primary thesis in the field of black male psychology. His presentation was very interactive, and a true pleasure. Dr. White engaged those who attended from the beginning when he opened his lecture asking people to identify common stereotypes or media images of black males.

Dr. White responded to these images by addressing the source of such stereotypes and the effects they have on other individuals in the black community. Specifically, he highlighted the dangers of media images telling young black men who they are supposed to be. Dr. White explained how media glorification of black society does not highlight the individuals who live common lives, but rather focuses upon often more destructive aspects of society. For this reason, many media images pose a large threat and destructive influence for young black men.

Dr. White believes in combating the strong influence of the media through a strong emphasis on mentorship within the black community. He has found that black men that have strong mentors and role models from within their community are often more likely to succeed. These young men do not turn to the media or societal influences for role models; rather they look towards mentors and leaders within their own community for direction.

Near the end of Dr. White’s lecture, he brought up a valuable point in regards to the roles and responsibilities of a mentor. Using the life of Malcolm X as an example, Dr. White explained how it is important that mentorship comes from within one’s own racial or ethnic community. In addition, it is the responsibility of a mentor to realize when to step back and allow the young student to develop into an adult. This may often mean the mentor may have to face challenges from his apprentice, and this must be embraced.

In addition to Dr. White’s lecture, he also held an evening session with students at Stimson House. This allowed Dr. White to effectively engage students on a much more personal level. This personal connection was made immediately as Dr. White began this session going around the room asking everyone to introduce themselves and speak briefly about their future aspirations and their motivations for being at Carleton, while also identifying their source of strength.

All in all, Carleton College was fortunate to have the presence of this intelligent man and personable person. In a brief 48 hours, Dr. White truly left his mark on this campus as students who attended one of these sessions are were present in a class that Dr. White was featured as a guest lecturer continue to talk about this man, his work, and most of all his personality.

Summer Leadership Program!!!

Monster’s Diversity Leadership Program is a unique chance for incoming sophomores, juniors and seniors to interact with individuals from industry-leading companies in a dynamic and fun environment while learning practical career skills. These high-energy events are jam-packed with presentations and activities provided by some of the nation’s most inspiring speakers and over 20 sponsoring organizations including PricewaterhouseCoopers, Enterprise Rent-A-Car, Hewlett-Packard, Shell, and Verizon Wireless. The summer weekend events will also empower student leaders by exploring areas such as resume building, career development, interview skills, diversity in the workplace and networking. The 300 students at each event leave with access to an invaluable network of professional contacts and mentors, new friends, fresh ideas and the possibility of earning thousands of dollars in available scholarships! For more information on dates and schedules check out the website www.monsterdlp.com.
Shout to Paul Gaines, an administrator, a role model, a strong black man, a friend. It was great getting to know you. Best wishes with your big move.
-David McCrea ’08

To the women of the triple, and even more to Tif Tyler, thanks so much for being there for me through this difficult period of growth... You are amazing ;)
-Audrey

Shout out to the lovely class of ’07! Good luck with whatever you guys decided to check on that little major sheet...now Carleton gets real!!! Much love to all of you guys! $Darlinda$

To all those who attended the Posse Plus retreat. YoU rOcK!!! -Posse 4

Wassup Santosh! Thanks for the shout out last term! I am happy that I can be a good MPL and at the same time a friend of yours. You have 3 more years at Carleton so make sure you live it up. Good luck with your work this term.
-Hikaru

Congratulations to the beautiful Ms. Nakina Eugene for her courage to try-out for the America’s Next Top Model gig!! I love you, girl!! $Darlinda$

Shout out to Bob Tisdale for holding it down.

Shout out to those lovely regulars of the library room under the stairs: Anani, Uwalaka, VanStory, Val, Maya, Golnaz, and Amous. They'll be kicking us out a lot of nights during this term, but it's all good!! Love y'all!! $Darlinda$

Big ups to the AFRISA Dance Team for winning first place at Umoja!! We did good ya'll! Sorry for the long nights but it got done!! ~Love

Posse I . . . you made it!

Shout out to my girls: Marquita, Cedrina, Ahava, and Amina!! I love y'all...I am glad I had the chance to reconnect with/get to know ya'll this past term and I hope we have many, many, many more happy days to come. MUCH love, $Darlinda$

"Way to go!" To everyone who is a helping, organizing, or participating in International Fest!

Congratulations Carleton Posse One! Thank you for everything!

Allez Club Caribé! (Coeur), Cindy

Shout out to Mama Tiff, Uncle Sead and Dr. Rafiq for stunning the Admissions and Financial Aid Committee.

Shout out to Posse members and Posse Plus--Thanks for attending the retreat and sharing the very interesting perspectives, just remember--it is our silence which separates us, so keep the discussions going! -R.B.

Adriana Estill is the best prof ever! (heart), Cindy

Shout out to Leena and Tita, I want to thank you both for just being there for me through the good times and bad. I'm so grateful that I've had the opportunity to become as close as we did, without you guys, my life wouldn't be the same. I love you both! --Raquel

"Way to go!" To everyone who is a helping, organizing, or participating in International Fest!

Congratulations Carleton Posse One! Thank you for everything!

Allez Club Caribé! (Coeur), Cindy

Shout to all those who participated in the Alternative Spring Break program with Operation Breakthrough. Cassie, Jade, Kace, Wendy and Sam, you guys all made the experience immeasurably memorable for me.
-Fellow activist at heart, Eunice ’06