

**Spring Break in Sweet Home Alabama**  
**St. Thomas More Newman Center**  
**Alternative Spring Break 2006**  
**By Julia Manian**

When I had initially signed up to go on Alternative Spring Break to Selma, Alabama, I think I had secretly presumed that I would leave the sleepy Southern town with new houses for the homeless and more food for the hungry and an immense sense of accomplishment tantamount to that of saving the entire world. But, as is often true, things don't quite seem to turn out the way you originally envision them to.

Rather, I became pleasantly surprised at all the things I learned while down there. On Sunday, our first full day in Selma, the group was given a lovely tour of the historic town by a very reputable (and hilarious) historian, Mr. Fitts. We learned much about Selma's history, especially pertaining to its role in the Civil Rights Movement, and immediately took a liking to the charming old man who knew so much about the town.

When Monday morning came along, we were eager and ready to work. A parishioner from the Catholic Church in town, Paul, met us where we were staying, with a list of different people and jobs he had for us all week. We initially went to a man's trailer that was falling apart, and concluded that we would build a small frame for a house on the property where there was space. Our group left the site incredibly excited that we would leave Selma having built the foundation for a house. This was completely what I had in mind.

Things changed however—what was meant to be a half a day's work fixing a woman's window turned into one and a half day's work fixing a window,

and a screen door, and painting the frame, with a few trips to the hardware store in between. On Wednesday we finally got to the third item on the list—patching up a small hole in a woman’s trailer a little outside of town. What was originally conceived of as a “small hole” turned out to be an entire bathroom floor that was caving in and needed to be replaced completely, along with the bathroom door, the entire toilet, and another fragile spot on the kitchen floor.

It wasn’t easy work either—quite frankly, it was dirty and messy and challenging and, at times, frustrating too—it seemed like things didn’t often work for us. We had finally taken out the screen door and taken the measurements, and finally bought a new one at the hardware store, only to find out the door didn’t fit. And that was how the week often went—we attempted to get something done, only to find out there was more or a different way it had to be done, which meant we usually had to do it again.

But in the midst of all the hard work, the incessant “change of plans,” the frequent frustrations, Paul remained steadfast, determined, and most of all, extraordinarily patient. His example was perhaps the most illuminating aspect of the trip. Paul did this on a weekly basis, asking for nothing in return. He helped others and put in all of his effort and heart in doing so. Where there were ample opportunities to leave a house with only completing what was asked to be done, Paul noticed all of the problems and didn’t leave the house unless all of them were taken care of. Perhaps one of the most astonishing and moving parts of the trip was the day I learned that Paul took care of a local blind man, who was very poor and living in pretty abject conditions. When he told us that he took this man

back to his house to bathe him, I knew I was in the presence of a truly holy man. By Paul's example, we learned that even the small, dirty, often unnoticed acts of service can be honorable acts when done with a lot of love. In Paul, we learned so much of what a true Christian is—his carefree attitude, his gentle temperament, his patience, and his determination to make the world a little better for those who needed a better world.

So besides learning how to replace a floor, or honing my hammering skills, or even being able to use a power saw, I think I speak for the entire group when I say that I learned so much more that week than I had ever anticipated. So no, we didn't leave that sleepy Southern town with brand new houses for the homeless, but we did leave with an understanding that perhaps building new houses isn't all that matters when it means truly professing your Christian faith. What matters is not so much whether you build houses, or feed hungry mouths, or merely spend a day trying to replace one screen door; but rather, how much love you put into it.