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excursions

Think Vacation

Think Making a Difference

Carolyn S. Ellis **writer**

When it's cold and daylight hours are short, most of us dream of faraway places. What's your idea of vacation? For many it's lying in the sun, reading a book, and hanging out with friends and family. For others, free time is more than vacation. It's an opportunity to make a difference.

"We're really lucky to live in Wellesley," says Wellesley High sophomore Lizzy Welch, "so it's really important to give back." The highlight of Welch's summer was ten days she devoted to Hurricane Katrina recovery at Mission on the Bay, a youth volunteer camp in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. Welch went south with a 26-member team from St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Wellesley and their partner church St. Stephen's in Boston's South End. The group was led by the Rev. Chris Wendell.



Work team members from St. Peter's Church Weston mix concrete with local workers in Tegucigalpa, Honduras where they spent a week helping to build a new dormitory at El Hogar, a residential school for homeless boys and girls.

Welch liked the feeling of accomplishment she gained from her work. The team cleared woody debris from a beach, installed drywall and insulation, filled sandbags and stacked them six high, and dug drainage trenches. People were grateful from the minute we got off the plane, she recalls. "You haven't forgotten us," they said.

St. Andrew's has sent youth work teams to troubled areas for the past eight years, including to Jamaica, Cuba, and a previous trip to Katrina in 2006. "These trips where our teens offer their services to others get them to think more broadly about their role in the world," Wendell says. "It's transformational to see another's reality and listen to others tell their stories."

Hurricane Katrina, the most destructive and costliest natural disaster in US history, hit the Gulf Coast in August 2005, causing damage estimated at \$80 billion and leaving 1,700 dead and 700 missing. The unincorporated hamlet of Pearlington in Hancock County, Mississippi bordering Louisiana was destroyed.

Town of Weston Selectmen responded by establishing the Weston Hurricane Katrina Committee (WHKC). On visits to Pearlington, Chairman Lenore Lobel identified the need for a community center and connected WHKC with the Building Goodness Foundation (BGF) based in Charlottesville, Virginia. BGF volunteers were building 12-foot by 16-foot shelters for people living in FEMA trailers to have clean, secure storage space.



Many Weston residents responded to help Katrina survivors. Carol Snow and her son John Crane drove south for February vacation, visiting colleges on the way and working hard when they hit Pearlington.

WHRC raised \$92,000 for building



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Alyssa Iacano of Weston plays cards with the younger boys at El Hogar in Tegucigalpa, Honduras.

materials, and BGF-directed volunteers have built the Pearlinton community center, scheduled for completion this summer. WHKC treasurer Bill Saunders went to Pearlinton twice. "It's like a mass movement," he says, "with tens of thousands of volunteers coming to the Gulf Coast. There's tremendous esprit de corps."

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 60 million Americans ages 16 and older volunteered through or for an organization between September 2006 and September 2007. That's 26 percent of the population, up from 38 million in 1989, and represents eight billion hours of service. The Corporation for National and Community Service reports that about one-third of college students, young adults, and baby boomers are volunteering.

Each year since 2001 Charles Ferguson, MD of Weston has spent two weeks in the remote town of Shell, Ecuador, at the edge of the Amazon rainforest. He performs surgery at the 28-bed Vozandes del Oriente Hospital founded by missionaries in 1959. The hospital is staffed by four family practitioners and one surgeon, young German and American doctors who make a five-year commitment to serve. Ferguson, director of the Surgical Residency Program at Massachusetts General Hospital, and others provide coverage when the surgeon is away. "It's work," Ferguson says, "but without administrative hassles."

Ferguson's daughter Emily accompanied her dad six years ago; she had just earned a college degree in marketing but was uncertain about her career choice. Following her experience in Ecuador, Emily Ferguson graduated from nursing school and is now a nurse on the thoracic floor.

Some venture across the Atlantic to Africa and the Indian subcontinent. Weston science and math specialist Pam Bator volunteered in Western Uganda in June 2008 with the Kasiisi Project founded by Elizabeth Ross in 1997 to educate the sons and daughters of subsistence farmers and plantation workers. One school and one student at a time, Kasiisi has built five elementary schools and provides scholarships so children can attend secondary school. The area adjoins Kibale Forest National Park where Ross's husband, the primatologist Richard Wrangham, conducts research. Bator and eight Weston Public School teachers taught classes of up to 160 students, offering enrichment units on fractions and literacy. The exchange brought Ugandan educators to Weston in 2007.

Ken Brede, DMD, a Wellesley dentist with offices in Needham, was most recently in Hyderabad, India for two weeks to provide dental care to 200 children in five orphanages run by Agape International. Agape International was founded in 2003 by Lynne Voggu, formerly of Sudbury. Voggu witnessed the suffering of AIDS-affected and HIV-positive infants and children and moved to India to found homes for them. Brede established a dental clinic in the Agape hospital.



Nicky Peacher, Cullen Corley, and Nicky Packs of Weston prep salvaged lumber for reuse on El Hogar's hillside campus.

The mission adventure is a family affair. Ken's wife Debra Brede, an investment manager, and their children Josh and Ashley serve together overseas. Debra's expertise in wealth management may not be directly transferable to the poorest populations, but Brede equipped a computer lab so the children can study English and other subjects online and develop employment skills, and she purchased a van to transport them to school and the medical clinic.

In July 2008 St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Weston sent a team of 15 to Tegucigalpa, Honduras. Their destination was the residential school El Hogar de Amor y Esperanza, "The Home of Love and Hope," that St. Peter's has supported financially for 30 years.

The team assisted with construction of a two-story dormitory. Local workers were laying concrete blocks and forming concrete beams; the team hauled blocks, screened sand and mixed concrete by hand, and prepped piles of salvaged lumber for reuse.

Witness is as important as work. "We strive to change the world one child at a time," El Hogar Director Claudia de Castro says, by educating and training the poorest so they can support their families and enter the middle class. Children who were malnourished and mistreated receive schooling, three meals a day, clean

clothing and bunks, and medical and dental care.

When work team visitors made a home visit and saw where one child's family lives without electricity, running water, or a working toilet, they could appreciate El Hogar's mission. Fifteen-year-old Nicky Packs of Weston says, "I had seen poverty in inner city Boston, but nothing like what we saw in Honduras." He and work team partner Nicky Peacher of Weston have raised critically needed funds for El Hogar and hope to visit again.

Peter Haas, a 1994 graduate of Weston High School, founded the not-for-profit

Appropriate Infrastructure Development Group (AIDG) in 2000 after traveling the world. "I saw that with the customary aid and development strategies we were building basic infrastructure that would be useless in six months if something broke." Haas realized he could pull together local resources and talent to create affordable, renewable technologies for sanitation, electricity, and clean water. AIDG works in Guatemala and Haiti.

AIDG offers short-term TecoTours, service-based learning for high school and college students. Teco-teams receive project training and study Guatemalan history and culture. Then they live in a remote village and complete a one to two day installation, using basic skills. "We don't want people doing busywork," Haas says, "and we need to leave the village with a fully functional installation."

Meredith Rahman was one of ten Weston high school students on a TecoTour to Guatemala in 2007. The team built a high-efficiency combustion stove that requires less fuel, reducing pollution and the incidence of lung disease. Rahman came home committed to environmental action; she is currently an eco-steward at Phillips Academy, Andover.

For teen volunteers, community service may be a requirement for graduation or seen as advantageous on college applications. Talcott Wilson of Wellesley, a senior at The Rivers School, has combined community service with travel many times. As a high school sophomore she joined Landmark Volunteers for two weeks of trail cutting in Western Massachusetts. She was comfortable working hard and being with new people, so the next summer she ventured 8,000 miles to New Zealand and Fiji with GlobalWorks Travel for four weeks.

Wilson's team worked in an eco-park where they did site clearing and planted trees. In Fiji Wilson lived with a local family, eating the fish and vegetables they prepared, communicating without English, and wearing a sulu, the Fijian sarong. In 2008 she spent March vacation with Rivers at a pediatric hospital in Romania. "Originally I thought, 'It's a graduation requirement,'" Wilson recalls, "but I discovered I really enjoy helping people."

As these volunteers venture outside their comfort zone, they form bonds with new cultures and people, gain personal strength, and accomplish something important. They dismiss the discomforts, recalling instead the joy of giving back for all we enjoy. One volunteer at a time, they contribute to our national culture of giving, at home and around the world, where need exists.

During December vacation 2008 Wilson joined a Rivers School Katrina relief trip to New Orleans. As with every service trip, she says, "The hardest part is leaving to come home. I'll never be the same; I received so much more than I gave." These experiences are more than vacation.



A two-story, concrete block dormitory under construction by local workers at El Hogar, with assistance from work team visitors from St. Peter's Church Weston who mix and load concrete in the rear left corner.