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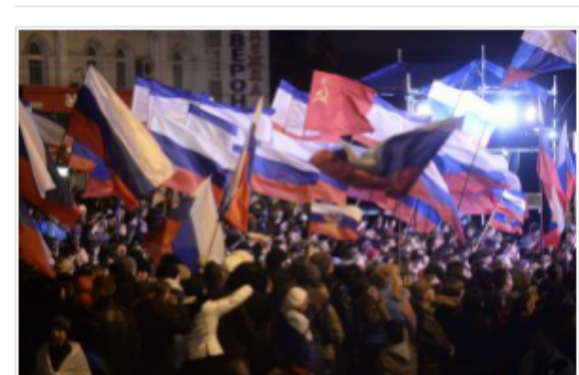
## For Howard University students, a spring break for an altruistic purpose



By Jeannine Hunter.

For 20 years now, Howard University students have skipped the beaches and other vacation spots to spend spring break rolling up their sleeves to help families and individuals throughout the country.

This week, nearly 400 Howard students volunteered 16,000 hours in six U.S. cities and Haiti as part of Alternative Spring Break, one of the nation's largest collegiate service-learning programs.



### Photos of the day: March 17, 2014

Holi festival, St. Patrick's Day celebrations, Paris brass, Purim, feline fair and more.

• Photos of the day: March 14, 2014

Participants tackle issues such as poverty, illiteracy, HIV/AIDS, homelessness, and gang and gun violence by providing pro bono legal aid, mentorship, tutoring and advocacy.

"Last year was the highlight of my life. I was exhausted, but the adrenaline was rushing because I felt good," said Nia Cleage, a sophomore from Detroit who served this year with a group volunteering with D.C. schools and community organizations for people who are homeless or living with HIV/AIDS. Besides the District and Haiti, students also helped out in Baltimore, Chicago, Detroit, Memphis and New Orleans.

The program embodies Howard's ideals of dedication to excellence, service, truth and innovation, said the Rev. Bernard Richardson, dean of the Office of the Chapel, which organizes the program.

Richardson, the fourth dean of the university's historic Andrew Rankin Memorial Chapel, established the program, which became a university-wide initiative with the support of the president's office.

"Each year, the goals have been to respond to the needs of communities through activism and service, to develop leadership skills among students, and to help students critically reflect on how they can positively impact those around them through service and their careers," Richardson said.

Hurricane Katrina's deadly strike on New Orleans in 2005 encouraged record numbers of Howard students to sign up for ASB. Three years ago, the program expanded to include the Caribbean nation of Haiti after the devastating 2010 earthquake.

Howard spokeswoman and graduate Kerry-Ann Hamilton recalled fondly her experience serving in New Orleans as a sophomore and then returning with Howard students as a university employee to help residents recover from Katrina.

"It's life-changing," Hamilton said, sitting in her office after wrapping up activities commemorating the university's founding 147 years ago. "It is also in line with the fabric of what makes a Howard student, and by extension, the mission of many historically black colleges and universities."

On March 2, the "Helping Hand" radiothon on university-owned station WHUR (96.3 FM) raised nearly \$70,000 for the program; last year, the event raised \$55,000. From 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., students and other supporters, all known as the Bucket Brigade, stood along Georgia Avenue, waving at motorists and collecting donations near the campus. During the Sunday morning service at Rankin Chapel, worshippers donated to a special offering for ASB.

On the radio, former and current ASB participants shared their thoughts about how the program has affected their lives. Some students talked about changing their majors or committing more time to service when they return home and while they're still students in Washington.

Last Saturday, hundreds of students, including Cleage, gathered at Cramton Auditorium on campus for a special send-off that was part pep rally and prayer service.

Howard's interim President Wayne A.I. Frederick, who holds three degrees from the university, lauded the students' sacrifice; most are not even earning college credit for the trip.

Then he read from a commissioning statement as students recited repeatedly, "I will. I am a servant of humanity."

Before a final roll call as students boarded buses lined up outside, participants chanted and competed in a playful dance/chant contest. They also prayed and debated with professors about their purpose, issues they may encounter and how the next week may affect them.

Ty Axson, a 2009 Howard graduate, recalled taking part in the program while a student. "The thing I love the most about Alternative Spring Break is that it served as a platform for students to take what they learned in the classroom and put it to work in communities that needed them most," he said.

Axson, now an Air Force captain stationed in South Korea, said he first served with ASB as a freshman site coordinator in New Orleans, six months after Hurricane Katrina, and continued as a site coordinator for other cities every year until he graduated.

Since college, Axson said he has been deliberate about "seeking out service opportunities where I feel I can make an impact."

"Some recent projects include work to fight human trafficking in Hawaii and work in local orphanages here in South Korea," he said. "I feel that is a direct result of my formative time with the ASB program at Howard. I will be forever grateful for the opportunity."

ASB tested and challenged him by "taking me so far out of my comfort zone that I didn't know if I'd be able to last the week," he said. "But in the end, I emerged better, stronger and wiser than I was before I left. It is truly the avenue where faith intersects reality."

Hunter is a freelancer who specializes in religion.

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