Sitting in a rocking chair on a porch in jeans and T-shirt, swatting away the occasional mosquito, I’m enjoying the sunset and sultry summer air. I am sentimental, wanting to cry and laugh at the same time, thankful for the moment, and my week.

The weather in Georgia in March is like the beginning of summer in New England. It is a welcome change from Connecticut’s long and bleak winter. The South is a great place to spend your spring break, especially among a diverse group of some of the kindest, most intelligent, thoughtful, and caring of your peers.
Forty-four University of Hartford students opted to spend this year’s spring break with Habitat for Humanity in Albany, Ga. Members of the University’s Habitat Campus Chapter worked throughout the year to raise money for and awareness about Habitat’s Collegiate Challenge.

Forty-eight-plus hours were spent traveling up and down the East Coast, from Connecticut to Georgia and back, in four 12- to 15-passenger vans. Forty-four 18- to 24-year-olds forfeited a week of relaxing, bumming around, working for profit, and playing in tropical getaways. Forty-four people started their spring breaks at sunrise as friends, acquaintances, strangers, and ended them after midnight a week later as a type of family.

The University’s Habitat Campus Chapter has been blossoming since its inception three years ago. Each year, it participates in the Collegiate Challenge, or Alternative Spring Break. Past destinations have included Durham, N.C., and Franklin, W.Va. This year, it was Albany, Ga., similar in some ways to our past Habitat spring break destinations but also different. The common goal of building affordable housing and a caring community in an area of need is always present, as is the spirit of the students to help, learn, and grow. The geography and memories are as individual as can be; all are precious. Each experience is life changing.

Our Habitat work site in Albany was in a beautiful neighborhood with other completed Habitat houses. Students were divided into groups to finish sanding and painting the interior of one house; put up the framing, walls, and roof of another; and clear land on an adjacent lot. The beauty of Habitat is that volunteers need no experience, just big hearts and open minds.

Monday through Friday, we rose at 6 a.m. at breathtaking Camp Kirksey—reminiscent of a summer camp, complete with bunks, a dining hall, tall trees, ponds, warm weather, mosquitoes, campfires, and cookouts—and started working at 8:30 a.m. Lunches were generously provided by local service organizations. Days ended at approximately 4:30 p.m., when dinner was again provided for us. There is nothing quite like Southern hospitality!

We worked alongside high-schoolers from Minnesota and students from Roger Williams University in Bristol, R.I. We awoke in the middle of the week to the news that a tornado had devastated a community merely 20 miles away—and brought our lunches to the relief workers. We were fortunate enough to visit the international headquarters of Habitat for Humanity in Americus, Ga. Nights were spent bowling, watching movies, roller-skating, talking, doing homework, and sleeping.

You may go into a community service project expecting to sacrifice, to give of yourself, more than anything else. The amount that you take away is one of the most amazing and overwhelming things you could ever experience. It’s what brings me back to Habitat and Alternative Spring Break year after year.

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