I’m not going to lie, when walking into our first team meeting, I felt like I was walking into the first scene of the Breakfast Club. I walked into a room so quiet where our team leaders’ questions were followed by dodging eyes and seconds of silence. Later on in the trip, during reflections, I discovered that all of our first impressions of each other were hilarious and we all bonded over the awkwardness of the initial meeting. It’s funny how during one week in another state, a group of people from different backgrounds can really become a family.

Now, when first asked by our team leader why we chose Affordable Housing, our team was quite honest. Besides being the wonderful, caring compassionate people that we are, we opted for a trip that wasn’t in Texas and with an organization we had heard of. However, throughout the week in Mississippi we learned so much more about the trip we had chosen and what it really meant to be a part of Habitat for Humanity.

Jackson, Mississippi is the capital of the poorest state in the United States. It is home to over 500 families that have benefited from volunteers just like us working through the helping hand that is Habitat for Humanity. It’s hard to imagine what those numbers really look like without having been there. As our team drove around the area of where we were staying, and where we were working, the impact of the organization was evident. There were churches, food pantries, and shelters on every block, but the community was still far from being rehabilitated.

Throughout the week we worked on rehabilitating two houses, each of which was in dire need of an exterior and interior paint job. We met another team, from the University of Eastern Illinois, that was made up of students just like us spending their spring break painting houses and making new friends. After one full day of work, 8:00AM to 4:00PM, we shared paint cans, stories and inside jokes (as well as a couple of traumatic experiences). We survived a giant spider infestation behind one house’s shutters and used a mini chain saw to cut down a couple of trees. True teamwork comes through in moments like those!

Needless to say, everyone in our team became very close and learned a lot of unexpected things from one another. Not to mention that each dinner was followed by a great game of poker or blackjack that may or may not have made me question my current career choice.

The work that we put in all week could not even compare, in my opinion, to what we received. On the last day of our trip we were able to go to a housing dedication. To those of you unfamiliar with Habitat, this is the day that the family finally receives their house. In order to make it this far, the new owners had to volunteer months of their time to Habitat’s other projects as well as help work on their own. This is a difficult time in their life, and we were able to witness the final outcome.

The house was being dedicated to a mother and daughter that had been through their fair share of tough times. The ceremony started with a prayer and a short speech from authoritative figures involved in the building process. It was when it was the new owner’s time to talk, the tears really did start flowing. She explained, through her own tears, how thankful she was to be a recipient of one of the Habitat houses and how difficult this journey had been for her and her family. She looked hopefully into the future and promised to provide for her and her daughter in a way that she had never previously thought possible. Being there for that dedication really put into perspective, the meaning behind Habitat for Humanity, and the week that during which we all opted to paint instead of tan.

I myself am so incredibly grateful for this experience and the lessons it had taught me. The staff at Habitat was amazing and their jokes and stories made the work go by very quickly! Before I knew it the week was over, and all I can do now is wait until next year to sign up for ASB once again!

Go Comets!