When I first heard about the opportunity to devote my spring break to service, I was a freshman who was really incredulous. Why would I want to “waste” my spring break? Now, as a junior, I looked forward to the trip, and in hindsight, I wish I had been part of the program my freshman and sophomore years as well.

I knew this trip would be related to sustainability in its many forms, and we did learn about composting techniques (and had the opportunity to use a compost toilet!), but I did not expect to learn so much about global poverty and world hunger. When we first arrived to the agency, we were all pretty floored by the conditions that we were expected to live in. The house was modeled after the home of an average family in South Africa, and had a dirt floor, four windows, no electricity, and little room. I did not know the others who were on the trip with me very well at all, and I did not know how I was going to make it through the week. I am so grateful that I stayed and fought through it. Alternative Spring Break has changed the way I approach life and the attitude with which I face the world.

Over the course of a week, I have gotten so close to my other team members, I honestly feel like we’ve become a family. Hard work/hardship really does make people closer, and the people who I barely spoke to at our team meetings before the trip became some of my closest friends during and afterwards.

The members of the agency with worked with were beyond inspiring. To intern with World Hunger Relief, Inc., you must commit to 13 months of service and learning with the organization. I was amazed at how positive and bright all of the interns were, as well as how creatively they organized and executed the activities that we had to complete. Furthermore, the gardeners exuded love of the land. I read quite a bit, and the experience of seeing and meeting and working with them reminded me of the protagonist of John Steinbeck’s To A God Unknown, whose love and respect for the land he owned led to his and the land’s prosperity. One line that particularly resonated with me was when the protagonist has an epiphany. He states with a quiet calm, “I am the rain. I am the land.” The people who worked at the agency exuded this kind of calm passion for the land and for service. I’ve never met such a dedicated group of people who were so patient with us, a group of students who at times did not seem the most excited to work that day, who at times grumbled and complained to ourselves.

Throughout the course of the week, work became less and less like work, and I became closer and closer with my team members. One day that I remember in particular required us to work for certain items we needed to cook our meal. We worked from 10am – 4pm in order to get a simple meal. We delegated tasks, with some people cooking, others gardening and cleaning. Once we all had eaten, we felt immense love and respect for each other as well as the realization that this is only a small fraction of what children in poverty have to face daily. The interns spoke with us about how people often think of those in poverty as separate from us, or “not our problem.” Learning about sustainable agriculture and
promoting sustainable practices in our community can help increase respect for our food and our land, as well as respect for all people, regardless of birthplace, and regardless of economic status.