After a hectic few weeks, I served as a student leader on a mission trip to Appalachia in Southeastern Kentucky. The trip was one of four mission trips sponsored by St. Monica-St. George Catholic Church to Appalachia in Kentucky and West Virginia, St. Louis, and Chicago. I have wanted to go on a mission trip for a number of years and jumped on the opportunity this spring.

Leaving for the trip, I was unsure of what to expect; we were told that we would work on whatever projects came up while we were there. Looking back, we could not have planned the incredible experience that unfolded.

We arrived at the Mount Taber monastery Sunday afternoon and stayed at the guesthouse. Each day ran in a similar way: About 7:30 am Sister Kathleen, who organized the volunteers, gave us the day’s assignments. We took our lunches to the jobsite and worked until late afternoon. Exhausted, we cleaned up, cooked dinner, and reflected on the day.

We worked at a number of jobsites including the monastery; St. Vincent Mission, a local community group providing a variety of services; the David School, an alternative for struggling students; and a couple’s home, deep in a holler. We spent the most of our time outside completing yard work, pressure washing, building a house addition, digging a French drain, and moving more gravel than I ever expected to in my lifetime.

The most significant part of the trip stemmed from the conversations we had with both the people we met and amongst ourselves. While the week was physically exhausting, I found rest and peace in my surroundings. I appreciated being outside for a change and am thankful for the beautiful weather we enjoyed. So much of college is constantly rushed and stressed, giving me no time to unwind and appreciate everything around me — it was refreshing and reenergizing to spend hours in community with others. Because of the rural area, I did not have any phone service or Internet access; it was a breath of fresh air to fully live in one moment without having to be concerned with other obligations.

The trip exceeded my expectations and greatly increased my understanding of the two community service learning outcomes I chose: (1) possesses awareness of service, including need for reciprocity, understanding of social issues, and ability to see those from multiple perspectives and (2) participates in community and understands own role as a citizen of community.

Much of the week, we worked at Jonathan and Ruthie’s home and developed a strong, working relationship with them. We all worked together which was something I was not expecting, and their gratitude toward our presence was truly humbling. I grew to understand the struggles faced by the Appalachian people from their perspective.

Through the course of many conversations, we learned about Jonathan and Ruthie’s previous failed marriages, illness of their children, struggles finding work, and the destruction of their home from the previous renters and a recent mudslide. Their dedication to family, strong sense of community, and symbiotic nature of their relationship stood out to me. They did not see their situation as a hardship but as an opportunity to draw closer together. Unlike our community where people live in constant flux, Jonathan and Ruthie are rooted within five miles of their current home and are very aware of their roles in the community and relationships with others.

Often, many people believe mission and service trips must go outside the country and overlook the needs closer to home. I observed the tremendous need for service within Appalachia and other places within the United States. People in the community are meeting some of this need; for example, the St.
Vincent Mission provides emergency assistance in exchange for community service at the mission working in the gardens, on construction sites, and in the food pantry.

Before departing, I utilized a number of resources to gain a better understand of Appalachia. Initially, I had little knowledge of the region and, even now, have just reached the tip of the iceberg. I began by researching how geography shaped the regions’ industries, economy, societal issues, and history. As a group, we watched the PBS documentary, Country Boys, following the lives of two boys at the David School over the course of a few years. We also read the bishop’s pastoral letters on Appalachia entitled This Land is Home to Me. Both of these resources provided a unique perspective – the documentary was from the community we served and the letters integrated the service and faith aspects of the trip.

Another resource was a panel we attended with the Christian Appalachian Project. Sister Kathleen served on the panel along with a long-term CAP volunteer and the director of this CAP location. We were able to ask specific questions regarding faith, community efforts, the war on poverty, economic factors, political influences, current issues, and progress. While this particular area has come a long way, all of the panelists agreed there is still much room for improvement, and they believe the key will be engaging the people of Appalachia in finding and maintaining solutions. One thing I learned is that while Appalachia as a whole faces many of the same issues, some are specific to particular regions.

The trip allowed me to gain a greater appreciation for service learning. I have always believed in ‘learning by doing’ but this trip was one of the first times my learning came almost exclusively from experience. Because I was reflecting throughout the trip, I discerned the extent to which the conversations and people affected me. I am passionate about service and its impacts on all of the stakeholders; I receive a sense of fulfillment from serving because I am investing my time.

My understanding of community was directly impacted as well. I have always considered community to be the group of people living and working within the same geographic area. The view of community I encountered in Appalachia was completely different — it viewed community as an interconnected group with shared values and beliefs, constantly affected by each other, and working toward common goals and beliefs. Relationships were emphasized as an investment to each other. Being in community requires a deeper connection than an alignment of materialistic qualities. I want to become this type of impactful, invested community member.

This experience helped me reach both personal and academic goals. First, I intended the trip to be faith strengthening. Starting college, I made goals for myself so I would not lose sight of my faith and relationship with God. The trip impacted the spiritual aspect of my life immensely which directly translated to my academics.

I began the week in a place of busyness, in schoolwork, activities, and mentality. I am very good at convincing myself I am doing fine when in reality I am not. I allow stress to adversely affect me and begin focusing on trivial things. I become numb to situations and an unable to enjoy my work. Although I have gotten better at recognizing this within myself, I let it get away from me in the weeks leading up to the trip.

I recognized this and asked God for peace of mind. On the last day, I was more at peace with school, situations, and myself than I have been in almost two years. I let go of tensions in a way I believe is only possible when I surrender to God and am in His presence. I felt surrounded by God in the beauty of nature, people, work, discussions, quiet moments, and laughter.
In many ways, experiencing another culture so different than mine has broadened my perspective on what is important in life, and I have seen this positively impact my schoolwork. Although there may not be a visible difference in my attitude and work, my mentality has switched from being solely focused on schoolwork and the future to a more realistic view, building relationships with people and living in the moment. While I will always be a logistically-focused planner, this experience exemplified the benefits of taking life one day at a time and reinforced the idea that sometimes ‘the best laid plans of mice and men often go astray’ for the best. This has been my biggest take away and, while it will take constant effort, I hope to keep this mentality for the remainder of my life.

For my dissemination, I collaborated with other honors students who participated in St. Monica-St. George’s other mission trips to create a photo book. We chose to include them in one book to highlight all of the trips and campus ministry, show the similarities and differences, give a more holistic view of the mission trips, and showcase our learning. We chose to give a copy of the book to the church and another to the honors program for students to flip through. Our audience is other students interested in service work and mission trips, and we hope our experience will inspire others to partake in similar trips in the future. The book emphasizes the importance of service as well as the way the Lord works through people’s lives. The copy at church is also for the parishioners so they feel a greater connection with the students, further strengthening the sense of community.

Overall, this mission trip has been impactful in ways I cannot fully explain. I was challenged to learn by living and am left with a renewed sense of passion, peace, and joy for life. I hope to continue with this mentality, investing in my relationships and honing my sense of purpose within my community.