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Office of University Communications

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BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. – Gardner-Webb students have lately grown increasingly interested in the local foods movement. So this spring, Stephanie Richey, GWU's community engagement coordinator and local foods aficionado, decided to capitalize.

"Gardner-Webb's Office of Christian Life and Service always plans awesome mission trips around the world, so I wanted to offer something a little different: not a mission trip but a service trip designed to meet the vast and pressing needs right here in Cleveland County," Richey said.

"The food theme is just something I'm passionate about, and something I've come to understand better and better over the last several years. So I called the trip 'Reconnecting with the Land,' and fortunately a handful of students were interested."

Five students signed up for Richey's service trip, each of them drawn by the opportunity to serve locally and to learn more about eating, shopping, and living more responsibly.

For five days and four nights, Richey and her team served in local soup kitchens, visited local gardeners and soap makers, and spent hours learning to make conscious and responsible choices at grocery stores and farmer's markets. They made bread from scratch, discussed sustainability with local farmers, watched documentaries on the food industry, and spent hours working in Gardner-Webb's community garden and planting potatoes for the Cleveland County Potato Project.

With the help of a local farm, they even slaughtered, cooked and ate their own turkey, an experience they said gave them a whole new appreciation for the people and the process it takes to "put meat on the table."

The trip was eye opening, to say the least, even for junior American Sign Language major Kristen Larimer, whose family has been gardening and canning fruits and vegetables for years.

"Slaughtering the turkey was really hard for me," Larimer said. "I'd never seen that happen, my meat actually being killed. But later, when we ate it, it tasted really good, and I knew where it came from. It was an awesome connection. Seeing something like that really makes you appreciate the people who take the time to prepare that food for you."

Presley Wesson, a junior psychology major, said even though the trip was all about food, “it was all about people, too. Everywhere we went, and with everyone we met, we built relationships. We learned how to better serve people by taking time to prepare meals and eat together. We learned to appreciate the farmers who we’re supporting when we buy vegetables at the store or the farmer’s market. And since these people are local, I can continue to help them, and they can continue to help me. I mean, the lady we visited who makes soap, she now makes my face wash and the lotion I use. I’m not just buying a product, it’s a real relationship.”

A longtime athlete, Wesson added, “Too many times, especially for athletes, we think of food as just fuel for our bodies. But this experience taught me that there is so much relational and even spiritual meaning wrapped up in how we shop and how we eat. I think we’ve taught our taste buds to like certain things that aren’t necessarily edifying. This trip taught me to redirect those appetites toward what is pure and good, and what is healthy for me, for the environment, and for the people around me.”

“You always hear about stewardship of financial resources,” said junior history major Madison Cates. “Well, this experience taught me that there is also stewardship of human resources and natural resources. Things can get so out of balance from what I think they were created and intended to be. This taught me how to reestablish some of that balance, just by doing something as simple as making my own bread.”

Best of all, the team says, they discovered the truth inherent in one of Richey’s community engagement slogans: “No one can do everything, but everyone can do something.”

“So often,” said Wesson, “people think living an organic lifestyle or being more self-sufficient is extremely complicated. But I really took simplicity from this trip. It’s all about making small choices to do something differently, not with a spirit of arrogance but out of love and humility. Many of the folks we met with didn’t even begin to pursue sustainability until later in life. We can always change and improve. We’re never done growing, and there is great comfort in that.”

For Richey, the experience was an affirmation that small decisions, like the choice to lead this trip, can have lasting and reverberating impact on others. Larimer, for example, has returned to one of the soup kitchens to continue serving in that ministry.

“I can’t be everywhere at once, but my goal is to do these acts of kindness wherever I can, and to take these opportunities to give back to people in our community who need it,” Larimer said. Other participants are now making their own bread, teaching their friends to shop responsibly, and sharing with others the deep connections they’ve discovered between food and friendship.

“Who knows where these students will take this knowledge,” Richey says. “My hope is that through them, this experience will change communities in other places as well. I know it will.”

Located in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb University offers a comprehensive academic experience that introduces students to the diverse world of ideas and to the people who think them, preparing them for professional success and for productive citizenship.

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