



UNH Students Head To Big Easy For Lesson On Complex Culture Of New Orleans

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March 11, 2009

EDITORS AND REPORTERS: Be part of the New Orleans class experience remotely via the New Orleans class blog: <http://whereyat.wordpress.com/>.

p>DURHAM, N.H. - Far from Bourbon Street and Mardi Gras revelers, students at the University of New Hampshire are delving into the rich heritage of New Orleans in a class that will take them to the Big Easy for a one-of-a-kind spring break experience.

"New Orleans: Place, Meaning, and Context" offers students a glimpse at the complex history of city that for centuries has blurred moral, ethnic and social norms. According to professor Bill Ross, New Orleans, with its amalgam of Spanish, French, Caribbean, African, and immigrant culture, has long served as the nation's unofficial link to the Third World.

"Together, we analyze the fabric and meaning of New Orleans and why, even now, many Americans want to hold the city at arm's length," says Ross, who also is head of special collections at UNH's Dimond Library.

One of UNH's most popular American Studies courses, the New Orleans class has been offered for three years after Ross began teaching it following an emotional experience there as a FEMA volunteer after Hurricane Katrina. In addition to discussing Hurricane Katrina and what it represents, the students discuss the complex issues of history, politics, race, poverty, power, social mobility, crime, corruption and the environment.

But unlike most American Studies courses, UNH's New Orleans class includes a trip to Louisiana over spring break, March 16-20, 2009. Organized by UNH's Alternative Break Challenge (ABC) and covered by a combination of university and private funding, the trip provides a rewarding opportunity for students to learn more about New Orleans, its culture and people, as well as participate in a community service project. This year, students will work with Operation Helping Hands, an outreach program of Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New Orleans started after Hurricane Katrina to rebuild homes of elderly, disabled or uninsured homeowners.

Senior Meaghan Odell of Dover, who travelled to New Orleans with UNH-ABC in 2007, is one of the trip leaders this year. The English teaching major says the experience was life changing.

"I will never forget the feeling of walking through the streets in the Lower 9th Ward. It looked like a ghost town -- totally deserted with small remains of belongings spread on the lawns. Some of the houses were flipped upside down or pushed down the street. At one house I stopped because I saw a pair of children's shoes in the yard. I felt the most terrible emptiness," Odell says.

She was struck by the people of New Orleans, particularly their upbeat outlook on life. "I remember talking to a homeless man who had left during the evacuation. He told me he had

returned because there was no place else in the world quite like New Orleans. It was his home," she says.

Ross says the experience of being in New Orleans transforms the class, bonding the students in unexpected ways. "Before we leave, it is my class. When we come back, it is their class," he says.

Odell says the service learning component of the trip is particularly rewarding.

"It was amazing to see the kind of work these volunteers were doing. As a group, we were putting up houses so quickly. I remember thinking how fast a project can get done when enough people are willing to work hard for someone else," she says. "The entire trip gave me a much greater appreciation for being a college student. Higher education is such a privilege and sometimes it's easy to forget that."

Those who want to be part of the New Orleans class experience remotely are invited to participate via Ross' New Orleans class blog: <http://whereyat.wordpress.com/>.

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 11,800 undergraduate and 2,400 graduate students.

PHOTOS

<http://www.unh.edu/news/img/neworleans1.jpg>

UNH students Rachel Bain and Dana Albert build a Habitat for Humanity home in New Orleans during the 2007 trip.

<http://www.unh.edu/news/img/neworleans2.jpg>

Bill Ross (center) works with UMass student Wayne Gerami and UNH student Christina Stark on a Habitat for Humanity home in New Orleans in 2007.

<http://www.unh.edu/news/img/neworleans3.jpg>

UNH student Christina Stark works on a Habitat for Humanity home in New Orleans in 2007.

<http://www.unh.edu/news/img/neworleans4.jpg>

In 2008, the students met some of the Mardi Gras Indians and learned about their culture. Mardi Gras Indians are mostly African American carnival revelers who have been parading since the mid-19th century in outfits influenced by Native American ceremonial apparel.

Credit: Bill Ross, UNH

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