

T
H
E



Serving a global community

IN THIS "GIRLS ONLY" shot, the American teens gather with the Jamaican girls for a group photo.

Story by
Kami Collins

To hear some students at Delta High School tell it, winter break is the worst. There's not much to do, and if you do go somewhere, like Powderhorn, you only end up spending lots of money and getting caught in a snowstorm on the way home.

But for eight students, the Feb. 14-25 winter break was much better than usual. It was, in the words of one student, "life-changing."

"It was the best break we've ever had," said Megan Lane.

Delta High School's ASTRA Club, the student organization sponsored by the Altrusa International of Delta, sent eight members to Highgate, Jamaica, during the break to help with Jamaica Outreach, a program operated by Ed and Pam Bliss of Crawford.

ASTRA is a community service club that supports various projects in Montrose and Delta County. In the past, members have assisted the Dolphin House and the Pregnancy Resource Center, gleaned onions from fields to be used in soup kitchens and collected school supplies for low-income children in the area. They also support, both financially and with donations of school supplies, clothing and toiletries, Jamaica Outreach.

For several years the Blisses have gone to Jamaica with different teams to assist the Lyndale Girls Home and the Swift-Purscell Home for Boys, two orphanages. They take supplies like clothing, shoes, flip-flop sandals and personal hygiene products. They also bring down different teams of people to assist with the needs of the children. This past trip, a Grand Junction dentist, Dr. Eric Toth, and five dental hygienists, went along to fix the children's chipped teeth. Musicians David and Tamara Hauze, also of Crawford, taught music. At the end of their stay, they left the children with sheet music and about 30 recorders to practice on.

Over the years, medical, dental, optometry, audiology, psychology and construction teams have gone with



ASTRA CLUB MEMBERS TRAVELING to Jamaica included Morgan Pulliam, Megan Lane, Tina Doerer, Breanna Kendrick, Stephanie Bear, Jared Campbell, Robert Duran and Ethan Twamley. They were accompanied by Ed and Pam Bliss, Jonni Kendrick, Jeannie Hellman, Nancy Doerer and Renee Ealey.

the Blisses to Jamaica to help the two orphanages. This was the first year they took a group of students.

About four years ago, some ASTRA members asked Pam Bliss to speak at one of their meetings. She presented a slide show on some of the work Jamaica Outreach had done. The club decided to support the project. Since then, members have gathered clothing, school supplies and toiletries for the kids in Jamaica, as well as raising money for other projects. But this year, eight decided to do a bit more.

For one week, seniors Morgan Pulliam, Megan Lane, Tina Doerer, Jared Campbell and Robert Duran and juniors Breanna Kendrick, Stephanie Bear and Ethan Twamley (who actually attends Cedaredge High School but became a member of the DHS ASTRA Club before CHS started a chapter), spent the week in Jamaica working at the boys' home.

Including the other teams that went to Jamaica, there were 24 people along for the ride, by far the largest group they've ever had, Pam Bliss said.

"It was an incredible trip," she said. "And the best we've ever had. We were very, very productive."

The intent of the trip was to build a library for the boys. Last October, their dining hall burned to the ground. The goal was to complete a library on the second floor of the dining hall, which is currently being built. The library isn't done yet, but there are lots of other tasks that need to be done, so the students were asked to help paint the new dining hall.

Sounds easy, right? Not really. First the students had to stucco the walls. Then the texture that was made from the stuccoing had to be rubbed off. To do this, the students spent an entire day rubbing down the walls and ceiling with broken pieces of concrete — no electric sanders were available.

"Nothing is mechanical in Jamaica," said Ed Bliss.

After that had been done, they painted the 1,600-square-foot room with three coats of paint. This took two days.

"It was their hardest task," Pam said.

It was not all work and no play, though. In between painting, the students took breaks and played with some of the boys at the home.

"I say it's more important to develop a relationship with a child than paint a wall," Pam said. "The relationships just flowed there."

"You don't realize how close you can get to someone in four days," said Breanna Kendrick.

Ed said he was approached by one student who told him the trip changed their life. "That meant a lot," he said.

After the dining hall was painted, the kids worked on creating a temporary library. Makeshift shelves were built and a book check-out system was created.

During the months leading up to their trip, club members collected boxes and boxes of books for the library. They spent \$340 on new books, money they raised from a recent bake sale. They donated their own personal books, and Mostly Books, a used bookstore in Delta, donated lots more to the cause. Club members said they plan to continue collecting books for the boys' library.

Along with all these books, they took medical supplies, school supplies, dress pants and shirts, shoes, socks and underwear for the boys at Swift-Purscell. They had 29,000 pounds of "stuff" on the plane, Pam said, and all that "stuff" filled

up an entire room to the ceiling.

The Lyndale Girls Home got some TLC from the ASTRA members, too, though there they spent more time playing than working. They set up a volleyball net and a basketball net and hosted a craft night, where they made picture frames and took the girls' pictures. One evening, the Delta girls gave the Jamaican girls pedicures, and the Jamaican girls braided the hair of the Delta girls.

During their last night in Jamaica, the boys at Swift-Purscell held a dinner for the students complete with Jamaican-style dancing. They also presented certificates to the ASTRA members.

Each of the students gave a girl or boy an envelope with their address on it, so the children in Jamaica could send a letter. It costs about \$1 to send a letter from Jamaica, and postage must be purchased there. It also takes about two weeks for that letter to make it to the U.S.

Breanna Kendrick said if she could, she would have bought more stamps and envelopes for the kids, who love to send and receive mail.

After four days of work, the students took two days of fun time in Negril, Jamaica. There they went to the Dunns River Falls. Tina Doerer celebrated her 18th birthday by parasailing while she was there.

"There is nothing we would change about this trip," Ed said. "It was wonderful."

Upon their return, the club members shared their experiences with friends and classmates. Now, several other students at DHS want to go, as do some of their parents. Several of the club members jokingly said they plan to return over their first spring break in college.

Though the trip cost about \$1,000 for each student, funds they had to raise on their own, the money was well worth it. "The amount of fun we had and meeting the kids — it was priceless," said Morgan Pulliam.

"I learned a lot," said Megan Lane. "Like just take it as it comes and don't worry so much."

"If you ever get an opportunity to do something like this, don't even think twice about doing it."

Amanda Twamley, one of the advisors of the ASTRA Club, said she sees the potential of taking a group of club members to Jamaica every other year or so.

The Blisses will be taking more teams down to Jamaica in October.



A NEW LIBRARY IS taking shape at the boys' home.



MEGAN LANE, MORGAN PULLIAM, Breanna Kendrick and Robert Duran are ready to hit the showers after painting the dining hall of the boys' home.

B
A
C
K

P
A
G
E