



Students' spring break to be missions of Mercy



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After Jennifer Blakemore's husband died five years ago, she was left alone with three sons.

A fire last year destroyed the family's rural Weston house, causing them to seek shelter for six months until rebuilding was completed.

But Ms. Blakemore is so grateful for what she has that the Mercy College nursing student is spending spring break this week in Guatemala with seven classmates, doing volunteer work at an orphanage with disabled children.

"I've just always wanted to do mission work, and I never had a chance – life got in the way," Ms. Blakemore said last week as the class of seven nursing and one radiology technician students made final preparations for the trip.

"I've had a lot of help, and I've had a lot of support," she added. "It's just like a payback for all the help I've been given."

The students from both Ohio and Michigan, who range in age from 21 to 48, are enrolled in a new course combining religion and nursing at Mercy called "Mission, Healthcare, Ministry, and Enculturation." It is taught by Sister Karen Elliott and Susan Bernheisel, who are leading them on the trip along with Dr. Margo Young, a California physician who like Sister Elliott is of the Sisters of the Precious Blood.

Many of the students have children and encountered adversity in recent years, including surgery, injury, and husbands losing jobs. Still, they have volunteered their time, and each contributed \$500 for airfare to help disabled orphans in Antigua, Sister Elliott said.

"You could be going on a spring break for fun, but you're going on a spring break to give back," she said to them.

Students came up with the idea for the course a year ago when they

were learning about foreign medical mission trips and decided they wanted to volunteer for one, too, said Michael McDermott, a nursing student in the class.

Fifth Third Bank has donated a grant of about \$2,400, which will cover hotel and other costs, and the hope is to continue the course next year, Sister Elliott said. The group will do some sightseeing before their volunteer work begins, she said.

The trip is based on the Mercy College core values students have been taught, including compassion and service, said Irene McDavid, a nursing student in the class.

"I would have never had the opportunity to take this service trip without the support," Ms. McDavid said. "It would have been too much money just to go by yourself, plus I don't think I would have found the courage to go [alone]."

Nine other Mercy College students, meanwhile, are in Baltimore this week for spring break on a service trip lead by Sister Sally Marie Bohnett. They likely will work with senior citizens, developmentally disabled adults, recovering addicts, and others in the poorest area of Baltimore.

The "alternative spring break" has been offered at Mercy College for several years, and its destination varies annually. This year, they will work with Sister Kitty Neuslein, a Sisters of Mercy nun who has worked with southwest Baltimore's poor and underserved for 30 years.

"You get the experience of helping different people, which you're going to have in the nursing profession," said nursing student Shirley Elswick, who volunteered for the trip both this year and last.