



COURTESY LEMON BAY ENVIRONMENTAL CLUB

Lemon Bay High School's Lara Doschner (standing) and Amanda Boots help clean a creek during the Environmental Club's "Great American Clean-Up" project in Englewood.

Make Your Vacation Count

Spring break should be more than just parties

By Anna Marie Neri, senior editorial assistant

You know there's more to Spring Break than self-indulgence. So why not have an alternative break, one that's positive, by initiating service projects either on your own or with specialized programs? Here are some ideas on how to deviate from a typical beach-bum vacation to one that provides a chance to enhance your leadership skills.

Throw a charity beach blast

If you don't believe in all work and no play, then here's a way to do something beneficial for society while having some sun-fun, too. Get help from students and plan a beach fund-raiser for a favorite charity. Make sure to organize the week with entertaining activities such as a surf competition, sandcastle-building contest, volleyball and sand soccer marathons, or a seashell-hunt race. Then, promote the idea around your school with posters and flyers. Ask that every participant make a donation, or have teams collect pledges and compete for a prize.

"My club wanted to do a beach project, but instead of having a fund-raiser, we took elementary kids out to the coast and taught them about marine life and how to care for their ocean habitat," says senior Erin Kavanagh, Environmental Club president at Lemon Bay High School in Englewood. "One year, we went kayaking to Dog Island and collected 10 trash bags full of garbage that campers left behind.

We had a blast while doing something good for the earth."

Do some spring-cleaning

Help a less fortunate neighborhood by offering to spruce up a local park, adopt a road, or paint a run-down community center. Start by recruiting other students to gather donated supplies. Then, offer incentives such as "accomplishment field trips" to water parks or other fun places, after each project. Remember, a little grunt work could earn your group press coverage, maybe even catching the eye of new members and supporters.

Staffers at Cayo Costa State Park in Boca Grande encourage high school students to donate their time and help maintain the grounds. Secretary Specialist Debbie Horner says, "Student volunteers can choose to either clean up a beach, clear trails, remove exotic plants, or paint cabins. Afterwards, they can always relax at the park and enjoy everything it has to offer."

As part of Milton High School's Naval Junior Reserve Officer Training Corp, Jane Passmore, a senior, participated in service projects for four years during summer, winter, and spring breaks. "I did everything from cleaning up our football stadium and planting trees around the city to helping elderly citizens fix up their neighborhoods after hurricanes and severe tropical storms," Passmore says. "It really benefits me knowing I'm helping people who can't help themselves." Contact Cayo Costa State Park at (941) 964-0375.

Baby the elderly

Volunteering to spend time with those in need doesn't have to be a drag. With the right group of students—creative, fun, and positive—a normally dull day with nursing-home grandmas or cranky Head Start preschoolers can actually be kind of cool. See if you can even combine the two groups. Come up with some smile-guaranteed activities such as coordinating a play for the kids to perform for the assisted-living residents, or help the children create goodie baskets to give to the seniors.

The Alzheimer's Respite Care Program in Orlando is one place where elderly patients await students willing to spend time with them. "We have so many things that high school leaders can help us with," says Susan Shaheen, director of volunteer services and training. "Our adult daycare patients always love to have someone work with them in music therapy or with arts and crafts."

As for working with kids, Lili Lissia, a junior at Gulf Coast High School in Naples, spent part of one summer helping children at a Pensacola housing project. "I went as part of 'Life Force,' my church's student choir," Lissia says. "Not only did we perform for these kids, but we also spent time playing with them and handing out candy. They were so hungry for love and attention, and I could see the appreciation in their eyes. It had such an effect on their lives and on mine as well."

Contact The Alzheimer's Respite Care Program at (407) 423-5311.

Join an alternative break group

Groups like the Federal Emergency Management Agency and Break Away are starting to include more and more high school leaders in their planned Spring Break activities. These organizations have students involved with everything from tutoring migrant farmworkers in Florida, building homes in Appalachia, and working with the homeless in Washington D.C., to registering voters in Mississippi. As part of the March of Dimes, Chain Reaction provided Melissa Silverman a chance to help raise money for Walk America. "I'm in my second year of the program, and last year I was the team captain for Walk America," says Silverman, a junior at East Side High School in Gainesville. "I worked with other student leaders to organize fund-raisers, like car washes, and to call local families to ask for donations."

By participating with national and state groups such as these, you can make college connections with the university students you'll work with in the future. Plus, you'll get to travel and help out in other parts of the country—something you might be reluctant to initiate on your own. "I got to work with the March of Dimes' Collegiate Council a few times, and I think it's really beneficial to have college students as mentors," Silverman says. "They're always there to offer advice."

Contact FEMA at (202) 646-4600, Break Away at (850) 644-0986, and the March of Dimes' Chain Reaction at (888) 663-4637.