

Discovering America

Kim Wheeler ('09) serves others in a memorable year with AmeriCorps

By AMELIA WOOD ('13)

As a JMU Student Ambassador, **Kim Wheeler ('09)** discovered AmeriCorps at a university service fair. Then, she discovered America one service project at a time. AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps provides “many opportunities that I am interested in, like travel, service projects and teamwork with people my age,” says Wheeler. She has fought fires in Idaho, helped clean up the 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, renovated Indian Reservations in South Dakota and raised money for children’s cancer research.

“The friends I made as a Student Ambassador are all incredibly motivated and inspiring people who made me want to be a better person. I learned how fun service can be,” says Wheeler.

After graduating with a B.S. in media arts and design, and a minor in sports communication, Wheeler spent the summer on her second service trip to Nicaragua. She also backpacked around the country, visited a beach with friends and spent time with family.

In October 2009, she joined AmeriCorps and dove into service projects related to education, the environment, public safety and disaster relief. Wheeler lived, worked and traveled with 10 people from all over the United States. “They became my second family,” she says. “We worked full time in 10 nonprofit organizations, and I did more than 100 hours of additional volunteer work with 15 other nonprofits.”

Wheeler started in Vinton, Iowa, where she trained in CPR, first aid, Red Cross Safe Spaces, Red Cross Mass Care, Red Cross Shelter Operations, Hands of Peace, ATV safety, chain saw usage, diversity issues, cooking, nutrition and driving courses.

AmeriCorps training is intense, and Wheeler says she felt “well equipped for anything” that might cross her path. Like most AmeriCorps volunteers, one thing that doesn’t need to be taught is self-sacrifice. In her first six weeks, working in Omaha, Neb., Wheeler cut her lengthy blonde hair in solidarity to support children with cancer. “Our team was supporting the St. Baldrick’s Foundation, which raises money for children’s cancer research,” recalls Wheeler. “I said good-

bye to very long hair that I had been growing out for years. Several JMU Student Ambassadors and JMU alumni donated to St. Baldrick’s through our efforts, and I will never forget that!”

Her service with AmeriCorps left Wheeler with quite a few unforgettable experiences.

In South Dakota, Wheeler’s team planned to work with Habitat for Humanity to renovate areas of the Cheyenne River Indian

Reservation. Two days into their work an ice storm hit, and efforts immediately turned from renovation to disaster relief. “Thousands of power lines were down, and several already impoverished local communities were left without heat and running water for weeks,” she says. Wheeler’s team helped run a 24-hour emergency call center through the Emergency Operations Command Center, answering phones and directing community members to the necessary resources. The team also helped run a shelter, delivered food and water, and made rounds throughout the Reservation community to report on progress.

While serving on the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation, Wheeler participated in a sweat lodge, a native spiritual ceremony. “It was incredible and an unforgettable experience,” she says.

The remainder of Wheeler’s AmeriCorps service included running disaster shelters, conducting controlled fires to fight wildfires in Idaho, leading youth events, maintaining parks and campgrounds, and helping recovery efforts from Hurricane Katrina.

Wheeler also helped clean up the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. “We were in Mississippi when the oil hit the beaches,” she says. “It was one of the saddest things

I have ever witnessed. It was yet another horrible blow for the Gulf community, still recovering from Hurricane Katrina.” And sometimes the best way to help is to drop the gloves and just listen. “We spoke with community members about all they had been dealing with over the last five years, and it was absolutely heartbreaking,” says Wheeler.

The legacy of Wheeler’s volunteer efforts epitomizes the power of one and the JMU community’s Be the Change spirit. ❧



Kim Wheeler ('09) discovered America and expanded her love of serving others during a memorable year with AmeriCorps.

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