

{The Big Event 2013}

2013 Big Event goes global

Alumni volunteer 525 hours thinking globally and acting locally


BY JAMES IRWIN ('06)

me a glimpse of a different way to live," Ehlers says. "The people were warm and worldly and they didn't define themselves by their work. It's more about community and visiting with family and friends and just enjoying life."

Noemi Dominquez, vice rector for international relations at the University of Salamanca, says the success of the partnership with JMU lies not only in academics and cultural exchange, but also in the lifelong friendships that develop among participants. "I think that speaks volumes about our program."

Lee Sternberger, executive director of JMU's Office of International Programs, says, "Having that level of language skill really allows our students to delve into the culture. The faculty in Salamanca are tremendous and our faculty in residence there are equally involved, so it's a real partnership."

From its inaugural Semester in London program in 1979, JMU has become a national leader in participation in Study Abroad. In fact, JMU ranked second in the nation in 2010–11 in the total number of students who studied abroad.

Today JMU students enjoy literally a world of opportunities for international study, including semester programs in Salamanca; Antwerp, Belgium; Florence, Italy; Beijing; and London; graduate programs in Florence and Malta; and more than 60 short-term programs spanning the globe. 



Brought together by a collective sense of community, more than 150 JMU alumni worldwide participated in the 2013 Big Event in April, totaling 525 volunteer hours. Alumni locations for the the Big Event — JMU's coordinated volunteer service day — included numerous Virginia locations, two spots on the West Coast (Los Angeles and San Francisco) and one in Johannesburg, South Africa, the first Big Event location hosted outside the United States.

"Living 8,000 miles from Harrisonburg certainly feels a long way away," says Lawson Ricketts ('05), who organized the Johannesburg event. He and a handful of JMU alumni helped plant a winter vegetable garden at Turning Point Home, a boy's orphanage supported by St. George's Church. "I thought this was an important initiative to get involved with — particularly within the context of South Africa's poverty issues."

Ricketts has lived in South Africa since 2008. While on safari — "literally, in the middle of the African bush, tracking elephants" — he spotted a JMU lanyard belonging to another graduate. She was researching black-backed jackals in the Madikwe Game Reserve and the two fell into a conversation that took them halfway around the world.

"It got me thinking 'how many other Dukes might actually be in South Africa?'" Ricketts recalls. "Once I saw the Big Event email invitation, I knew immediately we should pull something together."

Ricketts knew two additional JMU grads in South Africa, so he reached out to the JMU Office of Alumni Relations in February about participating in The Big Event.

The request caused quite a stir. "I was a little shocked," says Amanda Leech ('09), chapter coordinator in the alumni office. "To know someone halfway around the world is interested in [the Big Event] — it's inspiring."

The South Africa group was one of 14 alumni Big Event volunteer locations. Dukes volunteered at environmental cleanups, food drives and charity runs through organizations like the SPCA, the American Cancer Society,

St. Jude Children's Hospital, Equikids and Walk MS.


In Baltimore, over the course of four hours, more than 20 Dukes completed two weeks worth of work at Cherry Hill Urban Garden.



"Our work was completely hands-on — weeding, shoveling and raking," says Cory Hill ('06), Baltimore alumni service coordinator. "The Big Event is a vehicle that provides a unique opportunity to connect JMU alumni, not only to each other but to their respective neighborhoods and communities."

Baltimore chapter president Maria Heiser ('07) agrees. "To know we were joining fellow alumni all over the world and contributing to a great cause is a powerful feeling."

Big Event student and alumni programs totaled more than 850 volunteers in 57 service locations. Alumni in Philadelphia and Rhode Island did trash pickups to clear neighborhoods. Dukes in Dallas/Fort Worth packaged 7,675 meals for needy families. In San Francisco, in partnership with Big Brothers Big Sisters and TOMS shoes, 20 alumni each spent \$40 of their own money to purchase and decorate a pair of TOMS for a child in need.

"I think these types of events are what makes JMU stand out among many public institutions," says Ricketts, referencing the Big Event and Madison's Alternative Break programs. "These are two of the multitude of programs offered at JMU that made me see 'the bigger picture' and the need for philanthropy throughout the world." 

* www.jmu.edu/alumni