

Spring Breakers Surprised by Jesus in Spiritually Dark Spot

The land of bright sunshine and snow-white sand can be a spiritual dark spot each and every spring break. Rowdy weeks of partying often bring with them a spirit of recklessness and outright rebellion into Panama City Beach, Fla.

While locals brace for the invasion and disruption they've come to expect with spring, quiet forces determined to share the hope of Jesus Christ make their way south. Retirees who serve with the Georgia Baptist Disaster Relief Team link arms with college students from churches and collegiate ministries across the country for BeachReach.

BeachReach is a mission trip experience in the heart of Panama City Beach. Servant evangelism takes the form of free van rides and free pancake breakfasts. College students provide simple acts of service that open the door to life-changing conversations about the hope and love of Jesus Christ.

Here's how it happens:

Each evening a team of students takes their place in a call center, where they receive inbound calls from spring breakers who need rides. An entourage of white passenger vans, church vans and the occasional minivan are dispatched to the Panama City Beach strip where they offer free and safe van rides in hopes of sharing their faith.

Each morning, armed with pancake mix and truckloads of syrup, the Georgia team sets up a mobile kitchen in a nearby strip mall parking lot. Hungry spring breakers trickle in and are greeted with pancakes—pancakes that lead to conversations.

“BeachReach is often the experience that causes my students to share their faith for the first time,” Austin Wadlow, college pastor at First Baptist Church in Denton, Texas, said. “When they start a conversation, on the van or over pancakes, it opens a door in their walk with Christ. They go from not sharing their faith at all, to sharing it on the strip or in a bowling alley, to realizing they can do that anywhere. What they learn to do at BeachReach is so transferable to what they should be doing on campus.”

Prior to joining LifeWay Christian Resources as the BeachReach event coordinator, Bill Noe spent 12 years in Baptist Collegiate Ministry on the University of Louisville campus and participated in BeachReach year after year.

“I brought students to BeachReach and did so every year because there was no other experience I’d offered my students that created that kind of change in them, one that lasted beyond the week and came back to the campus,” Noe said. “BeachReach really seeks to help believers develop a passion and heart for lost students. That doesn’t just stay in Panama City Beach; it transfers back to the local campus.”

If Panama City Beach is the schoolroom for learning to share faith, it’s a rough one. BeachReachers are stretched and challenged by what they see and hear and, as they learn to share their faith, they learn to extend grace to their peers.

“One of the things that overwhelms me about BeachReach every year is how it takes spring breakers by surprise,” Noe said. “They expect one thing from us and they get something that’s so much more genuine, loving and gracious than they expect. There is a temptation to be overwhelmed by the behavior and think we have to correct behavior. That’s not the heart of BeachReach. BeachReach is offering the hope of Jesus through service.”

LifeWay continues to offer BeachReach as a ministry

opportunity each spring break.

“BeachReach is one of the most important ministries we do. We see both souls and lives saved each week,” Faith Whatley, LifeWay’s director of adult ministry, said. “As we mobilize college students to share their faith boldly, those van rides and conversations often save young women from dangerous and destructive evenings. The ministry our BeachReachers extend is life-saving.”

Last year, after two weeks of ministry, 11,186 van rides were given. Seventy-eight students accepted Christ. The 767 BeachReach participants served 9,473 plates of pancakes. At three pancakes per plate, that stacks up to 28,419 pancakes all prepared by the hands of the Georgia Baptist Disaster Relief Team.

“The Georgia team is made up of retired senior adults who know that Jesus loves these spring breakers, and at some level they may feel unequipped to reach them. But they’ve found this unique way to impact these students,” Noe said. “The pancake volunteers know the students are better equipped to have those conversations. They want to see that happen and they set them up to have those conversations over a hot plate of pancakes.”

It’s a collaboration of college students and an older generation who believe service and friendship will make a difference.