Through a partnership with Perry County, UA students learn about the strengths and struggles of rural communities and pair their skills with needs.

BY OLIVIA GRIDER | PHOTOS BY BRYAN HESTER, JEFF HANSON AND OLIVIA BOSWELL

2013, following five years of summer outreach efforts by students involved in the University Fellows Experience. 57 Miles now includes more than 12 programs. Through this expanding range of initiatives and projects, students collaborate with Perry County community members to identify challenges and develop and implement solutions. They draw on knowledge gained in the classroom while cultivating skills in project development, leadership, teamwork, nonprofit management and community engagement.

"Working in Perry County, an image of rural and overlooked America, has been integral to my understanding of exclusionary economics," says Rick Lewis, a junior from Birmingham, Ala., majoring in English. "Much of the rural South has been ignored or even purposefully shorted by initiatives aimed at creating modernized communities with strong economic support networks from all governmen- tal levels. Our work in Marion aims to fill these gaps and empower citizens to have their voices heard and answered."

During the 2016-17 academic year, 225 UA students dedicated nearly 3,000 hours to service programs and projects in Perry County.

"At the Honors College, we feel an important part of our students’ univer- sity experience is to get to know communities outside Tuscaloosa, learn about those communities’ strengths and challenges and match up their own skills and interests with the needs of the people of our state," says Jackson Harris, an Honors College community development coordinator who works full time in Marion. "Perry County is a good place to do that because we have a lot of friends and partners here." With the support of the Marion community, Honors College began leasing a building in downtown Marion in 2014 to serve as headquar- ters for 57 Miles’ efforts. Students named the building P3 to stand for a "third place" – a place besides home or school where people can gather to find personal and community identity. Various events, including community receptions and dance nights for local college students, are held at P3, and the building is open for community members to host meetings, study or just hang out. To facilitate town discussions and build relationships, UA students regularly attend functions at P3. In March and April of 2017, UA students worked with the Alabama Trust for Historic Preservation and the Alabama Black Belt Foundation to host the Spring Lyceum, an event that offered tours of sites including the Lincoln Normal School, one of the first educational institutions for African Americans founded after the Civil War. Marion Military Institute, Judson College and several antebellum homes. UA students led tour groups.

Harris says he’s proud of the posi- tive momentum he sees in his home- town and thrilled University of Ala- bama students are part of it. "With the help of UA’s Honors College and multiple nonprofits, I see no reason why we won’t keep moving forward," he says.

The 57 Miles Perry County Part- nership continues to add programs and participants. Current projects include:

• Day of Service events in which UA students participate in renewa- tion and beautification projects. In Fall 2016, UA students held two Day of Service events in partner- ship with Marion Military Institute, engaging 165 college students who worked with community members from schools and other organiza- tions. Groups worked primarily in...
Marion’s downtown square, painting a mural and restyling and installing landscaping around the county courthouse. In February of 2017, UA students partnered with students from Marion Military Institute and Judson College, holding a Day of Service in which more than 80 students helped community members with projects involving a nature walk, the downtown square, a community playground and baseball fields.

“I was able to invest in the state of Alabama, which is where I have the pleasure of calling home for at least the next four years,” says Kayleigh Westbrook, a freshman from Dallas, Ga., majoring in communication studies and general business. “It was a chance to see more of this great state and to experience the exhausting effects of a day of service, but also to see the amazing results. It was an honor to get involved.”

Holmes says beautification projects are vital to Perry County’s goal of improving its economy through tourism. “If a town is pretty and clean, people are more likely to stop, have lunch and ask what there is to do,” he says. “When they find they can’t do it all in one day, they’re likely to come back and bring more people.”

• Black Belt Action, a weeklong service-learning course for incoming Honors College freshmen that takes place before fall classes begin. While executing service projects, students explore elements of community and implications of systemic poverty through discussions with local leaders, group reflection and reading assignments. In 2016, 30 freshmen and eight student leaders performed renovation and renewal projects at Francis Marion High School and a building housing the nonprofit Renaissance Marion.

“This experience has made a huge impact on my life, from finding some of my best friends through college to making me appreciate what I have and see how I can better myself,” says Thomas Lengel, a junior from Wilmington, Del., majoring in finance and economics.

Lengel is a Black Belt Action leader and has participated in the program since he was a freshman. “I look forward to coming back to Marion every year because I can see the impact we’re making on the community as well as the freshman coming into an unknown area and learning more about Alabama.”

• Outdoor, an initiative designed to fight illiteracy and empower youth in Alabama through reading, writing and sharing poetry. Student teams travel to two high schools in Perry and Pickens counties to conduct weekly, hour-long sessions in which high schoolers analyze, produce and perform poetry. During 2016-17, 12 UA students worked with high schoolers in six classes.

“Tell me, Outdoor is a way to provide a voice to students who typically are not seen as having opinions on the goings-on of the world,” says Katie Carter, a senior from Auburn, Ala., majoring in secondary education language arts. “Writing provides students an opportunity to voice their thoughts, while poetry adds emotions to those thoughts.”

• Dinner with Perry County, held twice a semester, which brings Perry County community members together with University of Alabama honors students to dine in Perry County. Each dinner is based around themes such as community, entrepreneurship in rural Alabama and small-town politics in the South. Col. Ed Passmore, director for the Center for Leadership and Career Development at Marion Military Institute, hosted the first Spring 2017 dinner. Students from UA’s Honors College, Marion Military Institute’s service-learning club and Judson College discussed experiential service learning on college campuses.

“Having dinner with students and faculty in the Marion community inspired me to grow as a campus leader and community service participant,” says Anthony Berry, a senior from Jeanerette, La., majoring in economics.

• Engineering Day, an annual event in which UA students, faculty and staff present hands-on engineering demonstrations at Francis Marion High School. On March 24, 2017, 15 UA students, Dr. John Kim, assistant professor of chemical and biological engineering, and more than 300 elementary, middle and high school students participated in the event.

Students participating in Black Belt Action perform maintenance projects in a Perry County cemetery. RIGHT: Children practice their lines during a theatre project led by UA students.