

57 MILES

Perry County contains numerous historical sites, including antebellum homes operating as museums.

The 57 Miles Perry County Partnership, named after the distance between Marion, the county seat of Perry County, and The University of Alabama campus, connects UA students with community members to address rural poverty in a vibrant and historically significant area that is also one of America's most disadvantaged.

Perry County was once one of the wealthiest counties in the United States due to the fertile soil of the Black Belt region, but it is now among the poorest. As farming became more mechanized after the Civil War, the region's small farms were unable to compete with larger ones, and a slow decline began. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 47 percent of the county's residents live in poverty. The unemployment rate is approximately 10 percent, per the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, and residents face health and educational disparities.

At the same time, Perry County is home to two renowned colleges –

Marion Military Institute and Judson College – as well as a park containing some of the most ecologically diverse environments in North America, antebellum homes operating as museums, numerous other historical sites and communities rich with culture.

“People don't realize how much there is to see in the small town of Marion and how historically significant Perry County is to this state and even to the country,” says Cooper Holmes, a

sixth-generation Perry County farmer and director of the Alabama Black Belt Foundation. “Coretta Scott King was from here. She and Martin Luther King got married here. Gen. Sam Houston's wife was from Marion, and they got married here as well. Jimmie Lee Jackson was shot and killed in Marion, and his death led to the marches across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma.”

UA's Honors College launched 57 Miles as a year-round initiative in May

Students JD Reynolds and Johnny Reese paint lines to create parking spaces in downtown Marion.



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 governmental 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' university 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 headquarters 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.

Holmes says he's proud of the positive momentum he sees in his hometown and thrilled University of Alabama students are part of it. “With the help of UA's Honors College and multiple nonprofits, I see no reason why it won't keep moving forward,” he says.

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

- **Day of Service** events in which UA students participate in renovation and beautification projects. In Fall 2016, UA students held two Day of Service events in partnership with Marion Military Institute, engaging 165 college students who worked with community members from schools and other organizations. Groups worked primarily in

During Engineering Day at Francis Marion High School, UA student Stephen Tsiu explains the electronics involved in rocket launches.





LEFT: UA student Caylee O'Connor helps fill flower beds with mulch. **RIGHT:** UA students show kids a race car design as part of Engineering Day at Francis Marion High School.

Marion's downtown square, painting a mural and railings 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."

- **Outlet**, 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.

"To me, Outlet 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.

Presentation topics ranged from the electronics behind launching rockets to reducing the cost of space transport to the engineering required to build a racecar.

"Engineering Day at FMHS is an exciting, hands-on experience that gives high schoolers who don't have access to many STEM opportunities a way to see different options a STEM career can provide," says Kristen Homme, a junior from Chesterton, Ind., majoring in chemical engineering and biology. "I love connecting Perry County with the University's diverse network of students, organizations and research to help kids understand the impact of science and technology on their lives and foster curiosity about these fields."

- **Theatre projects** in which UA students teach high schoolers theatre principles through games and other activities. High schoolers are encouraged to make connections between these activities and life skills such as teamwork, critical thinking and presentation skills.

"Teaching theatre in Marion has given the other volunteers and me a new perspective and allows us to be inspired every week by our students, who are eager to try new things and experience the world from different angles," says Alexandra Bolton, a sophomore from Madison, Ala., majoring in social work and marketing.

- **Smith Gallery**, a partnership with the Alabama Black Belt Foundation in which Honors College artists in residence and other artists hold exhibits. Alabama Black Belt Foundation purchased and restored the downtown Marion building where the gallery is located, and Honors College coordinates and manages exhibits and events. The gallery gives Perry County residents a chance to see world-class exhibits, Harris says. The current exhibit, called "Common Ground," consists of photographs taken in Cuba and in Alabama's Black by Chip Cooper of UA's Honors College and Julio Larramendi. The photos highlight commonalities between the two places.

- **A summer internship** through the David Matthews Center for Civic Life, which facilitates partnerships between Alabama colleges and communities to give students experience living and working in small towns and promoting civic engagement. (See article on page 48 about a similar internship in Walker County.) Two Honors College students will live and work in Perry County in June and July of 2017. They will partner with Renaissance Marion to support strategic community projects.

For more information about the 57 Miles Perry County Partnership, contact Davis Jackson at 205-348-4648 or djackson2@crimson.ua.edu.

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.

