My trip to Stroud, Oklahoma connected closely with the 5 Pillars of ABE, particularly with regards to community, learning, and social justice. Throughout the week, our group worked on Habitat for Humanity, a children’s after school program, and painting a local church. These experiences, along with talking to locals redefined my understanding of community.

Life is a lot different in Oklahoma than in Minnesota. Visiting Stroud, OK we were strangers from the North. Yet, everyone we met was kind and interested in our lives. Everyone wanted to know where we were from, what we were studying, and what our hopes were. They cared about us as human beings without any prior knowledge about who we are.

Even a few days into the trip, families invited us to their homes for dinner. They fed us more than we could possibly eat each time and were always concerned whether we had enough. Their hospitality blew me out of the water. They invited us complete strangers to their houses and fed us generously. This reminded me of Matthew 25:35-36 when Jesus said, “I was hungry and you gave me something to eat…. I was a stranger and you invited me in.” A true community is welcoming of everyone and cares for their well-being.

Not only did these citizens open up to us, but they also reached out to others in Stroud. Helping out with the Food Pantry distribution opened my eyes to just how many people were in need of support in the community. Moreover, I saw how Stroud volunteers did all they could to help those in need. Many of the same community volunteers helped at the food shelf, churches, and Habitat for Humanity. Not only did they do their jobs, but they also were involved in the lives of those they were helping. They knew the regulars that came to the food shelf by name, and knew the struggles each of them were going through. Newcomers were approached with kindness and sensitivity in asking about their personal lives. In Stroud, the goal was not just to build a house or give food, but rather to connect with the individual and help in any way possible.

From the example of Stroud, I see that a community should do more than meet the needs of the poor and homeless. They should be invested in their lives and their well-being. Visiting the Oklahoma City Bombing Memorial, I saw how Oklahomans supported victims and sought justice for the oppressed. Similarly, Habitat for Humanity doesn’t just give away free houses. The program selects someone who is committed to becoming financially fiscal and responsible. Then, volunteers work with the selected family to teach them how to become self-sustainable as they contribute to work on their own house. Communities should go beyond the needs to serve the deeper issue of injustice.

In this way, the works of the community of Oklahoma taught me more about social justice. For instance, rather than losing faith and seeking anarchy in the face of the devastation of the anti-government Oklahoma City bombing that killed over 130 innocent lives, the citizens used the judicial system to seek justice. Although I disagree with the death penalty, the community pulled together to stop the terrorists and punish them in a civilized manner. In the process, they also garnered more rights for victims of terrorism through bills they pushed through Congress in response to the attack.

Locally, the Habitat for Humanity group strives to rebuild the community broken by poverty. To right the injustice caused by poverty and tornadoes, the program teaches the poor the financial skills they weren’t taught in high school. Rather than just getting a house, the program helps the benefiters to earn their no-interest-loan house and take responsibility for it. In this way, social justice is teaching a man to fish instead of giving him a fish.

In reflection, our group discussed how our experience in Stroud would affect our personal lives. Everyone expressed challenges that they were facing throughout the week. We also shared our aspirations for life and how this experience would affect them. From discussion, we agreed that we wanted to bring Stroud’s sense of community back with us. Their acceptance, hospitality, and generosity impacted us immensely and we wanted to mirror that.

As much as the Stroud community influenced our intentional living, we also had an impact on them. Many people we worked with commended us for foregoing our spring break to do service and told us that we had no idea how much we influenced everyone down there. Not only was the family grateful for the work we performed on the house, but the local volunteers connected with us and were sad to see us leave. Our service gave them hope and inspired them, as well as everyone who saw us walking around town. They would ask where we were from and what we were doing there. Once we told them we were with Habitat for Humanity, they thanked us for giving our time and energy. This proved to me that even our smallest actions can have a huge impact on people we don’t even know. Thus, we need to be careful with how we act and consider those around you, even the strangers, when you make decisions.

Besides learning how to hammer nails into wood, I learned a lot about humility. In Stroud, there were a few families that lived pretty wealthily while a majority of the town was in poverty. Although it was not always the case, there were a lot of people who were content with what they had. Some who came to the food pantry still had large smiles and were very friendly. Even though they could barely afford food, they still enjoyed the presence of friends around town and told jokes. The economy of the town suffered immensely from tornadoes and the rise in oil prices, yet the people there were as happy as students back at St. John’s. I learned a lot about gratitude and optimism from this trip, which I never could have learned in a classroom.

I will forever remember this trip to the humble town of Stroud, Oklahoma. Although it was not as extravagant as going to Florida or California, it is my favorite spring break trip. It taught me a lot about myself, who I want to be, and how I should live my life. My eyes were opened to the struggles that strangers face within our own country. I experienced a more humble, generous way of living that I aim to incorporate into my own life. The lessons I learned with regards to the 5 Pillars of ABE will be forever engraved in me.