Shawny Anderson leads a crew of students and alumni from St. Mary's College of Moraga, Calif., as they clear fallen trees from a stream on Joe and Vicky Germano's property in Paynesville. Anderson, who grew up in Madison, is an associate dean of liberal arts at St. Mary's and leads service trips around the world for disaster relief and development projects. (Staff photo by Ken Ritchie)

Shawny Anderson leads a crew of students and alumni from St. Mary’s College of Moraga, Calif., as they clear fallen trees from a stream on Joe and Vicky Germano’s property in Paynesville. Anderson, who grew up in Madison, is an associate dean of liberal arts at St. Mary’s and leads service trips around the world for disaster relief and development projects. (Staff photo by Ken Ritchie)

Shawny Anderson (top center) talks with a group of workers, made up of students and alumni from St. Mary's College of Moraga, Calif., about which trees need to be cleared next. (Staff photo by Ken Ritchie)

Madison native Shawny Anderson is a professor at Saint Mary's College of California near the San Francisco Bay area, but after tornadoes hit southern Indiana earlier this season, she felt the need to return home to help with relief efforts.

Anderson, a professor of communications, takes students on an excursion every January as a service project.

She's taken students to places such as Haiti, New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, and Tanzania.

This year she and 14 students decided to head to Anderson's hometown to help in the cleanup. Anderson is the daughter of Mervin and Janet Anderson.

"We stayed in Madison but went out into the surrounding areas that were hit hard, like Henryville and Chelsea," Anderson said. "We did hard labor, outdoor work, clearing downed trees, blocked creeks, and just did a lot debris removal."

The group stayed for 10 days, often working 10-hour days, meeting with families in the area that had been hit and needed help.

"This was a lot different than what we are used to. When we go somewhere like the Amazon or Haiti, we are completely self-reliant. We bring our own food, our own water, but people in Madison were so generous. They offered us food, water, places to rest and shower. We were so well taken care of in Madison."

"Vicky and Joe Germano .. we were helping them clear some debris and we received a lot of affection from them. They made us feel right at home. It made us so happy to be able to help them. While we were eating, I said, 'You know, we don't usually let people feed us,' and Vicky said, 'Well, we don't usually let people help us,'" Anderson said with a laugh.

"It was just an interesting combination of people surrendering their typical practices to help each other."

Anderson said she and her students were surprised at how far the areas hit had come in just a few weeks.

"We're used to coming into an area months after a disaster and just coming into complete devastation still. Here, people were making such great progress already. We thought we'd be seeing a lot more of crumbled housing, but houses were being rebuilt already. There was still quite a bit of debris, so we did what we could, but the community here has just pulled together and worked so hard to help those in need already. It was just amazing and inspirational to see that," she said.

Service to others is a big part of an education at St. Mary's College of California, which was founded in 1863 with an educational philosophy based on the writings and teachings of St. John Baptist de La Salle, who was the founder of the Christian Brothers and is the patron saint of teachers.

The "Lasallian approach" to teaching and learning "is based on the idea that education is how we give back to others - that we can only truly understand ourselves in relation to the world and the people that surround us," according to the college website.

"Enter to Learn, Leave to Serve" is inscribed on a sculpture of La Salle on the campus. It "says a lot about who we are," according to the website.

January is set aside as a one-month term when students and faculty members do service work.
As part of the project, the students film and photograph the places they visit, the work they do and the people they encounter to document the experience of the trip and the feel of the area and the situation.

Then they produce multimedia projects to tell the story of the place they visited during that trying time.

"We felt honored to be invited into these families lives and to help any way we could," Anderson said. "It was really a beautiful experience and an interesting look at how communities can come together during hardship."

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