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Students Continuing to Aid Communities During Pandemic

McLean Institute students, VISTA members seeking new ways to serve Mississippi during crisis

APRIL 20, 2020 BY JB CLARK

Jilkiah Bryant (right), a freshman CEED Innovation Scholar at the UM McLean Institute from Macon, and Tyra Lockett, a freshman biology major, pose for a photo between waves of people stopping by to get food at St. James Methodist Church in Columbus last fall. Photo courtesy Jilkiah Bryant

OXFORD, Miss. – While the rest of the country is adjusting to a new normal in isolation, many University of Mississippi students – including those involved in the university’s McLean Institute for Public Service and Community Engagement and the North Mississippi VISTA Project – are seeking new ways to serve their communities in times of distress.

Providing Food for the Community

Jilkiah Bryant, a freshman from Macon, is a Catalyzing Entrepreneurship and Economic Development, or CEED, Innovation Scholar at the McLean Institute who began doing community service at St. James Methodist Church, in Columbus, while attending the Mississippi School of Math and Science.

There she learned how to apply for grants and organize food drives. Since orders to stay home were issued, however, Bryant knew she would have to head her own, more directed efforts.

While home in Macon, Bryant began a food drive when she realized people were going to be stuck in their homes for extended periods of time. As the pandemic progressed and a statewide shelter-in-place order went out, Bryant said she was going to redirect her efforts to planning a voter registration drive.

"I was thinking about what we would need when we return to school – hopefully in the fall," Bryant said. "And since I worked at the courthouse in Macon this summer, I knew I could organize a voter registration drive."

Several partners who serve as AmeriCorps VISTAas through the institute’s North Mississippi VISTA Project have seen the need for their services increase since the pandemic hit Mississippi. VISTA is an anti-poverty program through AmeriCorps. The North Mississippi VISTA project, housed at the university, places VISTA members in some of the nation’s poorest urban and rural areas to build sustainable poverty-fighting systems through education.

Susan Van Fleet, an Ole Miss alumnus and VISTA member working with Doors of Hope in Oxford, is trying to get food to Lafayette County residents in need.

Normally, her work includes locally sourcing food to distribute to families who work with her financial
counseling and housing organization. She has transitioned into more of an online fundraising role to provide the increasing number of families in need with grocery store gift cards that can serve as a stopgap until things return to normal.

“We’re making sure people at least have money for food,” Van Fleet said. “We’re still targeting families with minor children and figuring everything out, but if they apply online, we can at least mail them gift cards or, if they don’t have minor children, connect them with the best organization to help.”

Providing Information

Taylor Robertson, a recent UM graduate and VISTA member, jumped into action the week the university extended spring break to collect in one place every possible resource someone could need during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A graphic designer, she was able to use icons that organize the information in a way that is accessible to everyone who might have a need, whether it be for food, finances or health information. She even included all the ways people can help others by giving back.

“There is power in information and strength in community,” Robertson said. “I think this perfectly captures what we are trying to do with this graphic and the whole project that it has become.”

The graphic can be seen on the McLean Institute’s Facebook page and the collected information is on the institute’s COVID-19 response page.

“Taylor worked tirelessly to collect information, format the infographic and seek approval from the sponsoring organizations,” said Laura Martin, the institute’s associate director. “The McLean Institute is uniquely positioned through our networks on and off campus to hear of resources and to disseminate those to a broad audience.

“And Taylor’s eye for design was a wonderful asset for presenting the information graphically. The students and VISTA members have the passion and heart for service, but also have a sense of their own skills and how to deploy them to reach the highest potential number of people.”

Addressing Rural Community Needs

In Marshall County, RJ Wilson, a VISTA member and retired pastor, is working to connect community organizations to provide for the needs of the people living in the county’s many disparate rural communities.

Wilson is working with the school district, local churches and the county’s 4-H Club to identify the needs of the senior citizens who live in the county’s rural pockets and then try to meet those needs, beginning with food.

“Marshall County is a big land area,” he said. “There are a lot of people stuck in one corner or another, down long dirt roads, and we have to figure out how to meet their needs.”

At the same time, he is meeting with the mayor and other community leaders to try to secure financial funding for New Hope Village Homeless Shelter, which closed due to lack of funds and community support.

“Due to the closing of New Hope Village, we have all these families and individuals who had to vacate and try to find other places to stay,” Wilson said. “There are some big holes to fill in the community now, but we’re working to fill them.”

JR Love, project manager for the McLean Institute, said students and partners have a strong interest in wanting to make positive and, when possible, immediate change in their communities and economies.

“I think because we’re led by a professor of sociology and we’re on a higher-education campus, our work is grounded academically, but we’re pushed every day to do things that will make a difference in the lives of people,” Love said. “The students know this isn’t a two- or three-year endeavor where they have to wait to see results. They can see them in two or three days.”