VISTA Volunteer Finds Her Passion is Service to Others

Elaine Pugh
OXFORD, Miss. – An interest in filmmaking and a passion for helping others led Lauryn DuValle to dedicate two years as a volunteer with the North Mississippi VISTA – or Volunteer in Service to America – project at the University of Mississippi.

The project connects the university and its resources to low-income communities throughout a 23-county area. The 20 VISTAs working in the area are full-time, one-year placements supported by AmeriCorps, with a modest living allowance, health benefits and an education award, which can be used for graduate school or to repay qualified student loans.

In the last year alone, UM VISTAs have brought more than $100,000 into Mississippi through grants and donations and have supported more than 4,100 volunteers at nonprofits and schools across the state.

In her second year with the project, DuValle is a VISTA leader in the College of Liberal Arts, tasked with training and supporting UM’s large group of other dynamic VISTAs.

“The theme of VISTA is to eliminate poverty through education,” DuValle said. “Our goal is to build educational programs that benefit children and adults in Mississippi.”

DuValle served her first VISTA year in the School of Education, developing programs to connect UM students with youth in underserved schools. A high point came when she brought to fruition the program Rebel Road Trip, which connected around 300 local elementary school students with around 200 UM seniors. (Note: This Rebel Road Trip is not affiliated with the UM Alumni/Athletics annual event with the same name.)

“It was an overnight bus trip to Birmingham, where we visited the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute and the McWane Science Center,” she said. “We created an opportunity for those kids to think outside the classroom and be actively engaged, and to see their faces light up to a world they had never seen was unbelievable. The first trip was such a success, it has become a School of Education tradition.”

With a bachelor’s degree in history from Grambling University, DuValle enrolled at UM in 2010 to study for a minor in screen writing and production. Her first film “Pickett” was chosen as runner-up in the UM Cinema Competition.

As a result, she was offered an opportunity to mentor students at Memphis’ Booker T. Washington High School as they produced a short film to make the school’s case for why President Barack Obama should select BTW as winner of the White House’s Race to the Top Commencement Challenge.

“I helped the students create their vision and understand the whole process of film, because they didn’t know,” she said. “They thought you could just set up a camera and that’s it. I assisted the (student) producer and the editor with camera angles, lighting tricks, shot lifts and the equipment.”

The resulting film won over hundreds of other entries and President Obama presented BTW as winner of the White House’s Race to the Top Commencement Challenge.

“I didn’t believe it at first,” DuValle said. “I was so happy for the school. Those students really deserved to win.”

As it turned out, DuValle may have been the big winner. She was chosen for a national award given by the Center for HBCU Media Advocacy, but more importantly, she said, was finding her passion.

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Lauryn DuValle has developed programs to connect UM students with youths from underserved schools.
“It’s one of the most beneficial points of my life,” she said. “The entire experience and helping the kids validated what I want to do: to open doors and give people opportunities who otherwise wouldn’t have any.”

Her next move was to join the UM VISTA project.

“Lauryn has been an exemplary VISTA,” said Stephen Monroe, director of UM VISTA. “She cares deeply about our state and country, and she is a wonderful representative of our university. Through VISTA, I’ve seen Lauryn develop into a strong and effective leader.”

DuValle added that she is considering continuing her national service through a 20-year commitment to the Air Force, where she hopes to be assigned as a journalist in film and photography.

More service-oriented individuals are being sought for UM VISTA, said Susan Nicholas, project coordinator.

“VISTAs like Lauryn make a tremendous impact, and there is no better way to develop as a professional,” she said. “We are looking for talented, devoted Americans of any age to join our project and to make a difference in Mississippi.”

For more information, contact Susan Nicholas at nicholas@olemiss.edu or Lauryn Duval at liduval@olemiss.edu.

The North Mississippi VISTA project is housed in the College of Liberal Arts and affiliated with UM’s McLean Institute for Public Service and Community Engagement.