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These students pound hammers, not booze, on spring break

By Mike Hoeft

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After a long Wisconsin winter, the prospect of partying in the sun over spring break certainly sounded alluring to Michael Demchuk, a junior at St. Norbert College in De Pere.

He considered joining buddies from his hometown of Park Forest, Ill., for a party trip to San Diego next month. But the dates didn't quite match and Demchuk didn't want to skip classes.

Now the swinging he'll do will be an ax.

On the advice of Nancy Mathias, Demchuk signed up for an alternative spring break trip to Chattanooga, Tenn., to help build the Cumberland Trail.

"I felt my time would be better spent doing something productive than sitting on a beach," said Demchuk, 21, a psychology major interested in teaching high school.

In light of studies ranking Wisconsin among the highest for binge-drinking by those 18-25, campuses are trying to break the alcohol-fueled spring break habit.

Mathias, associate director of leadership and service at St. Norbert, said the Cumberland Trail trip is one of five community service trips the college is sponsoring over spring break March 19-27.

Mathias said other trips include building houses as part of Habitat for Humanity in Georgia, assisting community living in Rochester, N.Y., tutoring kids in Chicago and helping kids' health in Memphis, Tenn.

As thousands of American students — some of them underage — gear up for spring break, other local campuses have stepped up efforts to combat the promotion of drinking vacations and alcohol on campuses.

Patty Wisneski, alcohol and drug abuse prevention specialist at Northeast Wisconsin Technical College, hands out cards saying, "Don't make the coroner your designated driver. Have a safe spring break."

"We are very vigilant about what is promoted as drinking on campus," Wisneski said. "It's important not only for students but our community. What they learn about alcohol here is going to be important to them in the future."

The objectives of an alternative break program are to involve college students in community-based service projects and to give students opportunities to learn about the problems faced by members of communities with whom they otherwise may have little or no contact, St. Norbert's Mathias said.

Demchuk said the trip on trail-building caught his eye. He'll be one of the drivers taking a dozen or so students to Tennessee next month.

Leading the trip will be Bryan Rezin, 21, a St. Norbert College junior. It will be his third time.

"As a freshman it sounded interesting to help build the Cumberland Trail," Rezin said. Each day, volunteers hike out to the end of the trail with their tools. They move rocks, fell trees and cut brush.

All told, he figures he's worked on 4 to 5 miles of trail in the mountains explored by Daniel Boone.

"Day by day it keeps getting longer. It's nice to know what you're doing will still be there. I can say I was a part of it," Rezin said.

It's billed as substance-free trip. As trip leader, Rezin has to make sure people comply with rules against alcohol or drug use.

"But we've never had issues with that. People who go want to make a difference," he said.

Allen Parks, director of Brown County Human Services, said binge-drinking among those 18-25 is 50 percent higher in Wisconsin than

the rest of the country. His department is working with the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services on ways to improve delivery of services in Brown County.

He said binge-drinking can lead to other risky behaviors such as sexual activity, crime or assault.

One key to deterring binge drinking is empowering students by encouraging them to participate in volunteer work, or serve on committees, advisory boards or a task force, said Andy Ziemelis, professor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.

“The more students become involved in meaningful activities that ask them to contribute something to others, the more likely they will feel their efforts and contributions are valued and make a difference,” Ziemelis wrote in the *Journal of American College Health*. “Getting the focus off of themselves and redirecting it in ways that help other people seem to be deterrents to binge drinking.”

Substance-free residences and consistent enforcement of alcohol policies also helped deter binge drinking, he said.