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Classroom: Coles County -- Books are good, but experiences are better

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Editor's note: Bill Duey is a Mattoon native who moved away and then came back to town. He lives here with his wife Renee and is on the faculty at Concordia University in Chicago. This week, a group of his students are in Mattoon for a one-week course titled "Cultivating Wellness through Service Leadership." The course will provide the students with several experiences in and around Coles County. Students plan to write daily updates for the newspaper.

Day 3, Friday, Jan. 13

By Clayton "CJ" Pasley and Leslie Benitez

For The JG-TC

CJ is from St. Louis, Mo., and I (Leslie) am from Chicago. Just before coming on this trip, I bought my school books and spent \$500; however, what we have been discovering is that Coles County is a "textbook" that is priceless. Books are wonderful "tools" to help an individual learn but communities afford an abundance of opportunities to not only learn but to serve! We have learned so much about service from those residents of Coles County that have come and served as our teachers. We have only been in Mattoon for 48 hours and yet we have learned lessons that we know we will carry with us for a lifetime. Some may read the previous sentence and feel as if it is "fluff" but the reality is that as one explores the assets of a community and seeks to uncover what is at the "root" of many of the issues in society, authentic learning, growing and convicting abounds.

Last night, we were blessed beyond measure by Beth Gillespie of Girls on the Run. Her passion for young women, grades 3-8th was truly inspiring. We laughed and nearly cried as her passion poured forth from her as she told the story as to what led her to this work. Each of us took away a diverse number of lessons from her presentation, but the clear message that came through was that people matter.

Today's presentations were wonderfully confusing as we wrestled in our hearts and minds with the information shared. Dr. Michael Gillespie shared with us the statistical profile of Coles County related to poverty which was helpful for us to struggle with as we were required to read the book "When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor or Yourself" prior to this course. Mike's passion poured forth as he not only sought to engage us with the statistics but challenged us to consider doing something with them.

Following a tour of Williams Elementary school by Principal Kris Maleske and a delectable meal at Burger King, we were given the opportunity to have Dr. David Skocy, assistant superintendent and Brian Miller, pastor of the Crossover Church. They shared with us a unique blending of how their respective institutions have come together to serve the children in Coles County through what is referred to as the back pack program. The discussions that followed their presentation were perhaps one of the healthiest exchanges we have been a part of thus far. This reinforced the fact that Coles County is most definitely a rich textbook that we have been simply blessed to open.
