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The Balancing Act: Mastering Volunteering, Tourism and Fun in New Orleans

“Linds, you got those... *energy drinks*, right?”

“Yehp,” I said, turning back to face Kendall, the inquirer, from the passenger seat where I had been rotting for the past 10 hours. “30 more minutes and we’ll be there! It’s going to be *lit*,” I said, winking at the four other girls in the back seats.

“Yeah, better not be too lit,” said the only male voice in the mini van. Ryan, our trip leader, looked like a younger Franco brother. He only stood about 5 feet tall, eliminating him as eye candy.

“Oh father Ryan, you know we don’t mean it like that! Don’t you trust us by now?” Carly’s sarcasm had been on point for the entire 20 hour drive down to New Orleans, and it was nowhere near letting up. “Giving back to communities is just so lit! We won’t touch a single drop of alcohol...Unless you give us the go ahead.”

“Like I said, I won’t say yes, I won’t say no. I just don’t want to know about it,” Ryan answered in his attempt at being assertive voice. “Just make sure you get the work done.”

New Orleans, known as one of biggest and oldest drinking cities in the United States, was our destination for the last week of our winter break. We would be exploring the downtown historical district of the French Quarter, with its mansions and bungalows dating back to the 1800s, eating powdery Beignets at the renowned Cafe Du Monde, and attending ghost tours in

both the French Quarter and Garden District. However, our trip was set to be far from the late night, alcohol fueled, Mardi Gras celebrations depicted in the movies. Our trip was a SUNY Oswego sponsored volunteer trip, where Ryan, our graduate assistant group leader, would be taking us to stay at Project Lazarus, a home for homeless men and women living with HIV/AIDs. We would be working from 9 a.m. until 4 p.m. most days, and were allowed to go out into the city with our group after. But one of the biggest restrictions on the trip was *no* alcohol.

When I signed up for the trip, the fact that I could not drink didn't bother me. I had been trying to get down to New Orleans to walk the historical French Quarter, eat some alligator, and see the infamous street where the bead throwing occurred for over three years, but being a broke college bartender did not even help me get past the New York State border. That was until I received an email from the Volunteer Club at SUNY Oswego about the Alternative Winter Break Program. \$175 to volunteer in New Orleans, which paid for transportation there and back, most of the food, and a place to stay. That I could afford. I also spent a majority of my time at SUNY Oswego volunteering for local projects and the mission of Project Lazarus was right up my alley. Although there were no pictures posted of what the Project Lazarus compound looked like, we were told that beds would be provided unlike some of the other trips. Instead of building houses, like for the Habitat for Humanity trips, we would be doing gardening around the compound, helping set up decorations for Mardi Gras, and helping the residents with GED homework.

I signed up for the trip the next day, and the following week found out who was in my group. Out of the 12 people making the trek down, we split into two separate minivans and it was apparent that I chose the right one. Kendall, Carly, T, and Emily became my co-pilots, cuddle buddies, and co-conspirators for the trip down.

While the thought of not drinking in one of the biggest drinking cities in the world originally did not bother me, as soon as the topic was brought up in the van it became apparent that it bothered everyone. Mostly everyone on the trip was 21 and wanted to spend their last days of winter break giving back, but having fun at the same time. I just wanted to be able to say I had one of the infamous Hurricanes.

Ryan, who we dubbed Father, ignored us a good 75% of the time and the rest answered us back with carefully crafted responses, in order not to go along with our level of inappropriateness. There were a few times that our antics almost had him crack, like when Carly told the story of how she woke up inside a closed Sub Shop after a night out on the town, and when Kendall almost threw up in the mini van because she had gone out the night before.

There was non-stop conversation in our van ranging from boys we all agreed were cute at Oswego, to professors we hated. Being that all our social circles at school were generally close, we all bonded right away. Our witty, sarcastic banter kept the car ride upbeat the whole 20 hours. No matter what time it was or who was driving, someone else always offered to be the co-pilot to entertain the driver and help navigate while the rest of the car slept.

Meanwhile, Ryan was receiving texts from the other van that things were not going too well. Only two out of the six people in their van could drive, and one of them (who also happened to be the only other guy on the trip) was supposedly falling asleep at the wheel. They were also stopping every hour and our van was two hours ahead of theirs. Our van stopped in Nashville, Tennessee, to get lunch and have the other van meet up with ours. When they arrived, it was apparent by how fast they jumped out of the van and away from each other that hostility was in the air.

“High maintenance and whiny,” said T after our encounter with the other van, “I can tell we won’t be hanging with them.” T was the pessimist of the group who did not have her license and opted for sleeping in the back of the van most of the trip, but the hours she was awake were always filled with comedic relief.

“I think we can all say we’re very happy we hopped in this van,” I said laughing, while everyone else nodded their head in thankfulness. It was safe to say we all appreciated each other after that.

By the time we reached New Orleans, the girls in my van had made a secret game plan of staying behind at the guesthouse we were staying at in the Project Lazarus compound while everyone else went to Walmart to get supplies for the week. We were getting there on a Sunday night and Martin Luther King Jr. Day was the next day, so we were not required to work that day. After everyone left, we would sneak out and explore the streets.

“We don’t know how safe the area is yet so be careful,” said Father as we waited at the Project Lazarus gates to be buzzed in by the staff.

“Ryan, there is literally a young, white, hipster couple pushing a baby stroller right there,” said Emily pointing out the window, “We’ll be fine.”

The districts of New Orleans that we initially drove through showed the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina 11 years before. Abandoned lots with the remains of housing foundations took up whole blocks. Fences that had been knocked down during the hurricane and debris were still

scattered over lawns. Homeless men and women pushing carts and sitting under dilapidated businesses littered the streets.

“My aunt told me to be really aware of the streets you turn on,” I said to the van while we were apprehensive, looking out the van’s windows at the area. “She said the neighborhoods change super fast. You can be in a nice, ritzy block, and the next one could be like straight outta Compton.”

But as we drove closer to Project Lazarus, which was in the Marigny section of New Orleans, a 10 minute walk to the French Quarter, the houses became more historic and well kept. Four story mansions took up street corners, with ornate, brightly painted trim. The sidewalks had glass mosaic designs built in. Adults in their mid-20’s wearing clothing straight off a festival ad walked their dogs or carried groceries along the streets.

“Literally we’ve been in here for 5 hours,” said T, growing increasingly agitated and antsy, “We need to get out of here.”

“I know, but it will only be a few more minutes,” said Ryan ,”They said over the intercom that someone was coming.”

“I think that’s the guest house were staying in!” Carly said, pointing to the left side of the property, where a house, the size of my actual house, sat with a huge wrap around porch. To the left of the guest house was a huge pond with a herring statue in the middle. Around it were new benches, Cherry Blossom trees, and hedges. The flower beds that surrounded the area contained bright exotic flowers I had never seen before.

Past the guest house and the pond was the main house, which resembled an old church. The main house looked like it had recently been painted with a vibrant mustard with burnt orange trim. The whole compound look more like a mini hotel resort than a non-profit facility.

“Guys, this looks nice. Like really, really nice,” I said while surveying the surroundings. I was impressed, definitely impressed. I had heard horror stories about past trips where volunteers slept on the floor in old churches, located in the middle of nowhere. Shops and restaurants could be seen the next block over, and right next door to the compound was the New Orleans Opera House where Beyonce Knowles’ sister had been married the previous summer.

“I think I’m about ready for that energy drink,” Kendall said, kicking my seat to get me to look at her. By energy drink, she meant one of the bottles of vodka I stowed away.

“I think I want to try one too,” said Ryan, oblivious to what we were actually talking about. The entire van, minus Ryan, erupted into muffled laughter. “What? You guys keep talking about it so it must be good.”

“Ryan! They’re energy drinks that have those special cranberry vitamins in it to prevent UTIs,” said Carly with a mischievous grin, “I don’t think guys drink them.”

“I see someone,” squealed T from the backseat, like she saw Beyonce herself, “Thank god! Let me out of here!”

After surveying the guest house, claiming our bunk beds, and taking showers, it was arranged that Kendall, Carly, and I would stay at the guest house while the others went to Walmart to pick our groceries for the week. Because T and Emily had food allergies, and didn’t trust the others with picking out food, they decided they would go to Walmart as well. We had

convinced Ryan to leave us with one of the gate clickers so we could go check out the restaurants down the street and get dinner.

“Please behave while we’re gone,” said Ryan, looking at us suspiciously, “The main house’s quiet hours already started and I really don’t want to start off the night on the wrong foot.”

“We’ll be *fine*,” we said while shooing him out the door. The three of us peered out the window, watching the other van drive out the gate and down the street.

“Ok,” said Kendall looking at her iPhone’s GPS, “the nearest Walmart is 20 minutes away. We figure they’ll spend a good 2 hours shopping, especially with how anal the other van is, and Em said she will text us when they’re at the checkout.”

“Let’s get changed and get out of here,” said Carly, already running for the room.

We tried our best to do our makeup like we had not been in a van for the past 20 hours, while still being minimal so Ryan would not be suspicious.

“Like I really don’t care if he knows that we drink because he’s a pushover and won’t kick us off anyway,” said Kendall while pulling on white cut-off shorts.

“When I went to Tennessee, we got boxes of wine the last night,” Carly, who had done three trips before Project Lazarus. “We were doing actual manual labor. This is nothing compared to that and Ryan is like 23 and chill.”

“Honestly, we can definitely get him wasted,” I said, already ready and impatiently waiting for the other two. “The other van is driving him fucking insane, so he’ll need a drink or twenty. Now hurry up both of you!”

We were dressed in our best casual going out clothes. All of us had packed gardening clothes and outfits we could dress up in case Ryan gave us the OK to hit the bar scene. But tonight, we were dressed in simple jeans and a tank top.

“Thank god I packed summer clothes,” Carly said fanning her face as we waited for the compound’s gate to open, “This humidity would have killed me if I packed the clothes for Oswego weather.”

“Definitely agree,” I said, becoming antsy by how long the gate was taking. I could have climbed over the 7 foot gates faster.

After it finally opened, we quickly ran out and onto the sidewalk, walking toward the businesses we saw earlier. “Freedom,” I said mockingly, with open arms raised.

“Guys! I know what our first stop is going to be,” Kendall said pointing up at one of the business’ signs. “Mimmi’s Bar! I buy first round!”

“Gals,” Kendall said while cracking open a PBR can,” I fucking love New Orleans. Like what the fuck, we can have open containers *anywhere. Anywhere.* Why isn’t this law universal?”

After spending two hours at Mimmi’s, learning from the bartender that you could bring open containers outdoors anywhere in New Orleans, and creaming two local guys at a game of pool, we decided to take our drinks around town.

“It’s like now I know why the term ‘road beers’ is a thing,” I said, stumbling a little bit on the cobblestone. We had also learned that they made their drinks significantly stiffer down South. After five drinks and six or seven shots, we were all pretty buzzed.

“I can’t believe Ryan let them get alcohol,” Carly said running up behind us, after chugging the rest of her Corona and hunting down a garbage.

“Right? That little bastard!” Emily had messaged us that Ryan had given them the OK to get a few bottles of wine at Walmart.

“Definitely little,” Kendall added giggling, “I wonder if he has tiny feet too. You know what they say about tiny feet...”

“Itsy, bitsy Ryan,” Carly held up her pinky finger, wiggling it around. We all hunched over in laughter. The beer in Kendall’s mouth shot across the sidewalk, making us laugh even more.

We decided to start walking back toward Project Lazarus and get pizza at Mardi Gras Zone, a convenience store, liquor outlet, pizzeria, and Mardi Gras beads wholesaler all wrapped up into one. While waiting for our pizza, we received a message from Ryan in our group chat that everyone at Walmart had decided to go to Frenchmen Street after they got back. Frenchmen Street was a 5 minute walk away and known for their bars with live jazz and blues music. Instead of creepy alley ways, they renovated them to hold flea markets with local artisans from 7 p.m. until 2 in the morning.

“Duh, we’re going,” said Kendall, already replying to his message that we would join them. “Now the question is should we keep this buzz going or wait to see if they drink?”

“I say we slyly keep it going,” I said, making a move to the nearest fridge to scour its alcohol contents. “You know they’re going to be chugging that wine when they get back.”

Carly, following in my footsteps, headed for the nearest rack of vodka bottles. “And we don’t have to do anything tomorrow,” she said, picking up a bottle of Smirnoff. “Thank you Mr. King!”

“Does anyone else feel kinda bad for breaking the rules?” Kendall asked, looking down sheepishly.

“As long as we're not hungover and obnoxious we're fine,” I said, patting her on the back. “The residence definitely go out all the time.” While Project Lazarus was for homeless men and women, the men and women who stayed there were homeless in the sense that they did not have safe homes to live in, or were staying in toxic relationships just to have a home. I had done some research before attending the trip and found that they often participated in Mardi Gras parades and other fun activities, so I assumed they also enjoyed a few drinks once in awhile.

“Ok, I just really do want to help and will feel super bad if we come off the wrong way,” Kendall said. “You know, my uncle has AIDs and giving back to people who are affected like him is why I signed up, despite what people may think.”

“It’s OK, Kendall,” said Carly, patting Kendall’s shoulder, “We all know you’re a raging alcoholic and that’s the real reason you came.” We all erupted laughing at Carly’s twisted skills of making light of a situation. “But in all honesty, people view students as just party animals. Ya, we are going to have a few nights of fun, but we’ll show them why we are truly here.”

“As long as we get our work done and aren’t obnoxious we’ll be *fine*,” I chimed in. “We are super fortunate and giving back to others who aren’t as fortunate is important. They’ll be appreciative that we’re here no matter what.”

After paying for the pizza and drinks, we walked the block back to the Project Lazarus compound. Just to be safe in case one of the workers came, and respectful to Ryan, we poured our drinks into cups. Thirty minutes and two drinks later, the rest of the group arrived. While everyone else got changed, we volunteered to bring the groceries in and put them away so we could go to Frenchman Street as soon as possible.

“Who would've thought that putting groceries away would be fun,” whispered Kendall while we were loading up bags on our arms at the van.

“It's because you're hammered,” I said, rolling my eyes and laughing.

“Baby Kendall, the lightweight,” Carly said, muffling her laughter while tapping my shoulder and signaling me to keep the antagonizing her.

“Ya Kendall, imagine you're the only one to get denied.” Out of everyone on the trip, Kendall was the only one still under 21.

“*Guys,*” she said in a whiny voice, “my birthday is literally two weeks away.”

“Better learn how to hold your liquor by then, girl.” After her fifth drink, Kendall did what we like to call ‘a baby puke,’ which is when you puke just a little bit from a gag reflex, compared to full on puke, head buried in a toilet, unresponsive the rest of the night.

“I'm *literally* fine,” she said, stumbling up the pathway with grocery bags weighing down her arms.

“Ken, be careful. I think you got the bags with the eggs and apples.” We heard a loud sigh emitted from Kendall's direction and did everything in our power not to pee our pants from laughing.

“We’re like a wild herd of cows trying to be lassoed in,” said Kendall, tripping over a curb on Frenchman Street. The street had surpassed our expectations. Bars lined the streets with music coming from each and every door. Neon lights flashed in all the windows, advertising their drink specials and band genre. Bands playing trumpets, trombones and more played in the alleyways that didn’t have vendors. Because most people had off the next day for the holiday, it seemed as if the entire city population flooded the street.

The other van didn’t have time to crack open their bottles after getting ready, so they were busy hunting down the best bar to go to.

“Just please be safe, keep your phones on, stay in groups, be smart, and let’s meet back at the gate by 2,” Ryan called after them, obviously already over trying to keep us all ‘lassoed’ in, as Kendall liked to put it. Emily and T had taken a few shots out of Carly’s bottle and decided to hang back with Carly, Kendall, Ryan and I.

“Ryan, I got this for you,” I said while producing a PBR for him that I had bought from a guy selling beer out of a cooler a block back.

“I need more than that after dealing with that group,” he said, quickly cracking it and attempting to chug it. “Let’s go find somewhere that’s not too crowded and take shots... On me.”

While deciding what bar we wanted to go into, Ryan explained that he wanted us to have fun, but be respectable to the people at Project Lazarus as well because they had a curfew and it would be rude if we were to be loud when we got back to the compound.

We ended up at the Blue Nile, known for their jazz bands and Hurricane drink specials. The bar easily had over 70 people already in it, but it was big for groups to be spread out, allowing people to easily walk through and get a drink, unlike the other bars. We started off by

taking Tic-Tac shots, a combination of orange vodka and Red Bull, then Cherry Bombs, Girl Scout shots, Buttery Nipples, and what was supposed to be one shot turned into too many to count. We all got a round of Pink Niles, a sweet concoction that smelt of tequila, vodka, and a hint of cherry.

“Ryan! Come dance,” shouted Carly from one of the side dance stages. Ryan, looking bashful, shook his head, until Kendall and I gave him a nudge and encouragement. He hopped on the stage and started doing his best Magic Mike skills, while Cary shimmied her hips next to him. The height difference was unremarkable.

“If they were to get married she would definitely need a stool.”

“Lets leave them too it and take another shot.”

“Where is Miss Carrol? I need to know if she wants these hedges any shorter.” It was our first day of work, and our first task was gardening. The morning was spent pulling weeds, trimming hedges, and cutting the overgrown Elephant Ear stalks, which grow 10 feet tall and make your skin itchy. Miss Carrol was our outdoor supervisor and was an older African American woman who reminded everyone of a loving, nurturing grandma. Before we started working, she brought us crumb cake for breakfast and showed us the cumquat bushes around the compound that we could eat if we grew hungry.

We had spent the previous day exploring the French Quarter, shopping at the French Market on Decatur Street, and trying to find the cheapest t-shirt deal possible. Of course we had a few drinks along the way. Ryan had let our van venture off by ourselves, but chaperoned the others because they had gotten a little too rowdy the night before.

“Ya’ll seemed like you had a good ole time the other night,” Miss Carrol had said laughing when we were all first introduced. “Almost woke the whole place up! Ya’ll were loud, but you should have seen the mess the last group had gotten into.”

We later found out that the previous group from Rutgers University had a student who threw up in the fountain. While the staff at Project Lazarus were not happy about it, they still let the group stay, but had them work longer hours. Both the staff and residents were extremely friendly, and it was often hard to even distinguish between the two because everyone helped with workloads and guided us in our activities.

After we finished up doing the outdoor tasks and our lunch break, we helped decorate the main building for Mardi Gras. With the help of the residence, we made traditional Mardi Gras masks with green, yellow and purple accents that were to be hung on the Mardi Gras tree, a neon pink Christmas tree, downstairs. The residence told us their stories of how they were diagnosed with AIDs and thrown out of their homes by their parents, how they turned to drugs due to the depression of feeling like an outcast, and how Project Lazarus saved their lives. We learned that Project Lazarus does not only act as a shelter, but that the faculty also transport the residence to whatever meetings they have and classes. They also bring in counselors, yoga instructors, and therapy dogs for the residence. It is not just a place one goes to live, but a community that helps you want to be the best person you can possibly be.

“You know, even if we didn’t have Ryan as our group leader and we didn’t end up drinking a drop of alcohol, this trip would have still been amazing,” I said to Kendall, Carly, Emilt and T later that night as we walked along the Mississippi River. Just as we were about to cross a train overpass next to the river, the sun began to set over the Gulf. “New Orleans was lit,

but meeting and connecting to these people is so much better.” All four stopped like myself in awe of the sight, and nodded in agreement.