

St. Gabriel's Mercy Center Scholar Reviews

Jia Dua (Duke '22)

My job was a cross between leading a classroom/summer holiday programme for a group of roughly 15 students aged between 7-11 years old. Oh my days, these kids brightened my life! My partner (Aaron) and I had close to full ownership and freedom over the classroom which gave us the flexibility to be creative with the activities we did with our kids and really broaden their horizons in our short time with them. Initially we were under the impression that this program was meant to be more academic but we realized the kids were so much more willing to bring the energy and get stuck in when we didn't force them to sit with a book in their hands. We tried to incorporate traditional curriculum learning through arts and crafts, themed weeks, games and sport, music, dance and drama to try change the way these kids think about learning as something exciting, eye-opening, practical and fun rather than dreary and unmotivating. That was the general gist of my work but I have so so soooo much to say about this job and if you're interested please don't be shy to reach out and chat to me. St Gabs is a really special place to be and I wish I had known more of what I was getting into when I was a freshmen going into my first summer.

Community summer is nothing without a positive attitude and a willingness to leap headfirst into the challenge of living with people who you barely know, entering a work, social and cultural environment that may be totally foreign to you and making the most of your time in a place where no one is there to nag you to do one thing over another. Do take the time to get to know the other scholars living with you and to get out of the house and become part of the community you're living in. Being in a rural part of America is super eye-opening and a real heartfelt experience and having 2 months of almost absolute carefree freedom is something you might not have for a long time to come. Though we took our jobs seriously we also had so much fun doing things for no reason other than the fact that they were just fun and exciting to us. Cleveland is a quiet place so you have to make an active effort to create the memories you want to have from this summer but I would highly encourage you to go on as many roadtrips as possible, stay out of your own room and in common spaces where you can interact with people as much as you can and say yes to activities or experiences you would normally be inclined to pass on otherwise. These are where all my favourite memories of this summer were made.

Aaron Williams (UNC '22)

This summer in Cleveland, Mississippi, I ran Saint Gabriel's Mercy Center's Summer Youth Program alongside Jia Dua. Our primary job entailed creating and teaching lesson plans to the kids who attended our program. The program ran from Monday to Thursday. We originally began with about 18 kids (ages 7-13), but that number changed as we reached the end of the summer. On Friday's, Jia and I worked at another local summer camp, called FlyZone. This summer camp was one in which we focused more on finding fun, creative, and non-educational activities.

This summer I learned a lot about leadership and different aspects of it. I think the biggest thing I learned was that leaders need to know when to step back and let someone else lead. This was a huge part of my job because I had Jia there. We often times would trade leadership in the classroom, and we worked with each other's strengths. I would wholeheartedly recommend Saint Gabes to anyone who works well with little structure or someone who wants to become better in such circumstances. The lack of structure is not the fault of the organizations, it is mostly because of what they have come to expect from scholars who work there. You will not be treated like an intern or anything of that nature. They will treat you like an adult and like it is an actual job because it is. That's why it is crucial that you go in being able to advocate for yourself and ask all questions.

Rahi Patel (UNC '21)

I worked at St. Gabriel this summer, where Antonia and I ran the Summer Enrichment Program for kids from Mound Bayou. The kids are ages 7-12 (though this range shifts a little every year), and we had an average of 15 kids at every class (this number also tends to fluctuate yearly). We were responsible for running the program from Monday

through Thursday, so we had to come up with lesson plans for every day. We were also in charge of getting snacks for the kids every week. Every Robertson scholar class that has worked at St. Gabriel has left a binder filled with their lesson plans, though, and that helped a lot with planning once we got there. We also went on a field trip to the Grammy Museum and the skating rink, which the kids loved.

Working in Mound Bayou and meeting the people there is one of the most rewarding parts of working here. The history of the town, and the pride in community that the people there have is so unique. I'd definitely recommend attending a church service there, meeting locals, and developing relationships with the town.

Antonia Young (Duke '21)

From Monday to Thursdays 1-4pm I was a teacher for the Summer Youth Enrichment Program at St Gabriel Mercy Centre in Mound Bayou (a 15-minute drive from the house). My co-teacher and I would get to work at 9 am and do lesson plans until the kids arrived at 1 pm. We were teaching grades 3-7 with full reign over lesson plans, which meant full creative freedom over what to teach and how to teach it. My second job was on Fridays from 10am-5pm working at the GRAMMY Museum Mississippi. I created a presentation tying Blues music to the Civil Rights Movement for outreach for teachers in the area.

I want to advise other scholars to have FUN and be KIND to yourself! These kids are amazing and they are smart and want to learn. Kids, as you may know, also can be rambunctious at times so learning how to set boundaries is really important. You will learn when is the right time to be their friend and when the right time is to be their teacher. Challenge yourself to be creative with lesson plans- its hard but the effort is definitely worth it. Make sure to do arts with the students as well as the usual courses because they don't do heaps of it at school. They really enjoyed painting and acting. Make sure to listen to them because what they have to say is really important and insightful. I learned a lot from them. I also learned that it is so important with kids to keep your word and not make promises you can't keep because they will hold you to it. Also, make an effort to get to the know the people you are working with at St Gabriel Mercy Center. They have great stories to tell about the area and are so kind and welcoming. I was lucky enough to form a bond with one of the women who worked there and it was so nice to talk to her when I was struggling (which happened often).

My biggest piece of advice for outside of work; travel, travel, travel! I was lucky enough to find people in the house to travel with every weekend, which meant I got to spend every weekend exploring Southern locations and culture. Don't be afraid to spend your budget on things such as Air BnB, southern food, museum tickets if required and new experiences. Cleveland is close to Memphis, Greenville, Greenwood, Jackson, NOLA, and Nashville (some of the places we went). Some of us were even lucky enough to make it to the Legacy Museum and the Lynching Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama. We were also really lucky to have four cars between 10 of us so, if possible, try to get 3-4 cars to Cleveland for transport. It allows people to split up and go where they want to ensure everyone has the experiences they are seeking. The area is steeped in history and culture and there are so many sites to see. I learned so much about America's history and feel as though I understand it a lot better than I did before, which I am so grateful for.

Esosa Asemota (UNC '20)

During this amazing summer, I lived in Cleveland, MS and worked in Mound Bayou, MS with St. Gabriel's Mercy Center. At St. Gabriel's, I was a camp counselor for a summer enrichment program for younger students (the age range was 7 - 11 years old). The camp ran on Monday - Thursday, 1-3 pm. My co-counsel and I were able to develop and implement our own curriculum with a great amount of freedom.

Advice for other Scholars.

First off, I 11/10 recommend St. Gabriel's. I am so thankful for the work I was privileged to do and the beautiful people I was able to meet.

The kids at St. Gabriel's are so lovable. That does not mean that they are always super easy, but they are so precious and so full of potential. Despite the challenges of being in under-resourced school system, they are a smart bunch. Teaching is hard, and some times will be more difficult than others - sometimes, you may find yourself feeling drained or frustrated. You may find yourself feeling like you aren't making enough progress. But, in those moments, I urge you to keep going, and not half-heartedly, but with everything you have. As coined by a Navy Seal, "when your mind is telling you you're done, you're really only 40 percent done". You still got more than half of that determination juice in you! Pour out as much as you can during these two-three months. Of course, self-care is super important, and I am most definitely not advocating you neglect that (you better, please) I am simply saying don't give up, because these kids are so worth it. Let them be left with something more than the year in which the Constitution was signed, or how to spell 'legislation', or how to do long division - all those things are important, but leave them with something in their heart as well as their mind. Leave them with the understanding that they are valuable, loved, and capable of greatness.

It might take everything inside of you, but I promise you will not leave with regret.

Do your homework - there are so many resources online and within the Robertson program - and prepare to be the very best teacher you can be.

Rachael Murtagh (Duke '19)

I worked at St Gabriel's Mercy Center in Mound Bayou. It was a 20 minute drive from our house on Shumate Circle in Cleveland. A sort of taxi service transported Visrut and I to and from work each day, but we had some issues as some days there'd be no driver to pick us up, and they were always late.

The center itself is a remarkable place. It's run by a small group of helpful staff members, including a group of nuns. The Sisters are some of the kindest and most helpful people you will ever meet. Unfortunately, they were back in Wisconsin for their retreat for the majority of my time at St Gabriel's, so I didn't get to see as much of them as I might have hoped.

The center runs many different programs, offering a diverse range of services to locals. Here is an excellent article that accurately and succinctly explains each program at the center, and who runs it.

<http://www.mississippicatholic.com/tag/sister-monica-mary-dequardo/>

The only program the article doesn't mention is ours! So Visrut and I ran a Summer Youth Program for 2nd-6th graders. The program is designed to help the children learn through fun activities. We have a focus on literacy and numeracy, but a main role is to broaden the student's horizons and teach them things they wouldn't have the opportunity to learn at school. For instance, what better way to learn about Europe than from a European like myself!? And surely the best way to aide an introductory French lesson is to sample French baguettes! Visrut was able to teach the children about India. And we learnt lots about dinosaurs, plate tectonics, volcanoes, plants, the human body and so much more. Sometimes it was hard to find the right balance between fun and learning, but all of the children who completed the camp thoroughly enjoyed it. We had 27 or so applications, at first around 18 students would turn up, and then that dwindled to a solid 13-15, and dropped off again after 4th July. Some students who come to stay with relatives for the summer leave the area towards the end of camp, others don't return if they get in trouble at camp. But for the 2 of us, having about 12 regular campers was a perfect number. Our age range was 6-12, which meant we had to be more creative with planning activities to try to make sure students are stretched accordingly and don't get left behind or left sitting bored. Camp officially ran from 1:30-3:30pm, but children would always arrive early and leave late. After a few weeks in some students would arrive as early as 10am. Behaviour wasn't too bad an issue. Of course there's a group of mixed age students, attending a camp during their summer, so you'll have to work to keep them focused and engaged to try to ensure the best behaviour possible. There are always some characters, and some of the worst behaved students didn't return after the 3rd week.

Our morning's usually consisted of a meeting with the center directors followed by lesson/activity planning and setting up for the afternoon with the children.

Every Friday there was no camp, so we'd go to Walmart in Cleveland to buy the children's snacks for the next week. The children would have a snack and recess break in the middle of camp.

The kids are the whole reason we're there, and you will truly become their friends.
Warning: You will grow to love these children and saying goodbye to them will be hard.

You may have really productive days, where the children are very engaged, love every activity, learn lots, have fun, and are surprisingly well behaved.

You will have more challenging days, where the children don't like the activity you've planned and/or behave very badly, and you don't feel they've taken anything from the day, and you're left to clear up a classroom that looks like a bomb-site!

The important thing is to go with the flow. Celebrate the great days, Accept the tough days. Learn what goes well, and what doesn't, and plan accordingly. Be ready to adapt your lesson plans.

Boredom will lead to bad behaviour so always differentiate your tasks to give the older/more able students more challenging work (not just heaps of easy work) to push them and keep them focused. At the same time, if a task is way too tough then students won't engage, so have a wide range.

Be firm with discipline from the beginning.

Try to get involved with the other programs at the center.

Visrut Sudhakar (2019)

Ben Ayto, Lizzy Zhao, Liv Linn (2018)

Virginia Hamilton & Jacob Olliffe (2017)

Jacqui Slorach

James and I were essentially given a space at the community centre, a strong support network and resources and asked to teach something to the 30 local kids over 2 months. We constructed a curriculum, discipline system, and learned as we went as to what interested and didn't interest the kids. It was challenging and fantastic. We both definitely learned more than the kids did. Our Robertson group in Mississippi was very active also. We went away most weekends, spent a lot of time bonding as a "family" and tried to truly explore Mississippi and learn what it was about.

Get involved in as MUCH as you can! Mississippi is definitely one of the places that will really help scholars develop as a tight knit group. We had the chance to visit New Orleans and noticed how different the dynamics were, they tended to do a lot more of their own thing. If working at St Gabriel, I would definitely suggest looking back over the past scholars folders to see what we have done before you - you won't believe how immensely helpful it is. It is also a good idea to go into it with some idea of not necessarily lessons or what you want to teach, but what you want the children to take away from the whole summer because it will affect the entire camp. Also, we had mapped out as a group a plan of what we were going to do each and every weekend. We had a calendar on the door for all to see with the dates of our trips and that was super handy and kept us active, busy and adventurous! I would definitely recommend making a plan. I would also highly recommend taking a trip down the Mississippi. We did that in a Kayak as a group at sunset and it's one of my fondest memories to date.

James Smith (UNC '16)

I worked as the co-director (with one other UNC scholar) of a summer youth enrichment program at the St. Gabriel Mercy Center in Mound Bayou, Mississippi. Program participants ranged from 1st to 7th grade. We designed a 7-week curriculum, discipline system, etc. and focused on science, world cultures, and entrepreneurship.

My summer in Mississippi was probably the best part of my undergraduate experience so far. Make sure a couple people have cars and go on trips! We traveled all over Mississippi and the Southeast US. Definitely visit the scholars in NOLA for the 4th of July and go on a tour of the Mississippi river with the Quapaw Canoe Company.

Minali Nigam (Duke '15)

As a program coordinator for St. Gabriel's Summer Youth Program, my responsibilities entailed coming up with fun learning activities for the children, implementing a disciplinary system, and helping direct the final performance at the end of the program. In addition, I tutored a student for the ACT and shadowed Ms. Davis and Ms. Black, two volunteers for the Parents As Teachers program.

Everything you need to know (in vivid detail) can be found at <http://msdeltasnapshots.blogspot.com>

Julian Borrey (Duke '15)

St. Gabriel Mercy Center was a community center which provided free services to enrich people in the community. This included free sewing classes, child caring lessons and the summer youth program which the Robertsons ran. We designed a 6 week program for students to have enriching education experiences which they wouldn't get anywhere else. These children were usually single parented and often by their mothers whom would be working long hours. These kids lacked a role model and things to do in the summer break. The Robertsons provide useful activities for them. In our time slot which was 2-5pm we did things like make model rockets, examine a sheep brain and build a water filter. Working with these kids was very fun but very difficult because usually they would have terrible classroom decorum. Please ask for the log book to get a better description on the types of activities that we did. SGMC is run by a few paid people from the community and many volunteers. It was extremely flexible work in the sense that you had full control of the content and running of the camp. This therefore entailed lots of initiative and planning for each day. Our two biggest themes for this camp was science and world culture which I think were good because the kids had little exposure to both.* teaching* inspiring* kids* enrichment* discipline* organize

Working at SGMC will teach you about seriously disadvantaged kids in Mississippi and you have the chance to make an impact but it is extremely challenging. Running the camp was a test of endurance because discipline had to be constantly controlled while running the entire day's activities. It was rewarding but it is one of those positions that almost regardless of what you do you look back and wish you did more.

The sort of person who would like this role is one who likes working with kids and developing communities. You need to have patience but also be firm when necessary. These kids are a tough bunch to handle but the right mindset will get you there.

Kat Zhang (Duke '14)

I helped organize St. Gabriel's summer youth program along with two other Scholars. This program, which lasts from noon to 3 p.m. on Mondays through Thursdays, attracts about 30 children between grades 2 and 7 (the number of attendees wavers from year to year). St. Gabriel's offers a wide range of other programs and services, but I was not substantially involved with any of them. My day-to-day tasks included:- Teaching English (and a random assortment of other things)- Supervising morning activity and recess- Distributing snack- Administering discipline- Organizing special activities such as parties, field trips, and special activities

Of the three teaching internships in Mississippi (GRS, Sunflower, St. Gabriel's), St. Gabriel's has the least structure by far. This can be a positive aspect, seeing as it allows the teachers to take a lot of liberty in designing their own

summer. On the other hand, it can be frustrating as well. Unlike GRS and Sunflower, the three Robertson Scholars are the only people running the program. We do not have other teachers or staffers whose sole responsibility is to oversee the program. Our mentor Sister Donella is always available to help, but think of her as a consultant rather than a director. Scholars in this placement will have to be responsible for everything from determining a daily schedule, establishing a disciplinary system, planning their own curriculum, and watching the children from the beginning of the day to the very end. If you are thinking of working at St. Gabriel's, know that it will be totally your show. You will have to run it.

Something else to know is that St. Gabriel's is not an academic program. This is very, very important. The other Scholars and I did not understand this going into last summer. We thought our role was to teach academics -- reading, writing, math, and so forth -- to the kids. Unfortunately, we did not learn until later after much difficulty and agonizing, that our mentor had envisioned something completely different: a program based more around fun than learning. That's not to say you can't teach any academic lessons at all. But know that the kids are hugely underperforming. Many of them cannot read or write, which makes real academic progress overwhelmingly difficult. They are much happier (and well-behaved) engaging in active outdoor pursuits than sitting in a classroom listening to you. Organize your summer around that. Make fun your objective rather than learning. You can intermingle academics with your other activities, but it should not be the crux of the program. I hate to call it ""babysitting,"" but that's what it is in a way: shoot for healthy fun, not the transfer of real and substantial knowledge.

Daniel Strunk (Duke '14)

St. Gabriel's Mercy Center, Inc. is an outreach program affiliated with the Sisters of Mercy. It provides services and support for the Mound Bayou community, one of the oldest and longest lasting all African-American communities in the United States founded by former slaves. These programs include emergency assistance (including financial), parent training, sewing education, GED course instruction, senior outreach, a computer lab for the community, a thrift store, and a summer youth program. Of most significance to Robertson Scholars is the summer youth program, as this is almost exclusively what they will manage during their internships. Key Work Responsibilities: In reality you only have one work responsibility-- conceive and execute the Summer Youth Program. In meeting this one goal, however, you have several sub-goals. These include: Running the actual program. The program runs from 12-3pm Monday-Thursday. You are responsible for supervising anywhere from 20-40 children during this time. Organizing group activities and individual activities for the students, making sure that these activities are fun. The Summer Youth Program should be viewed as more akin to a "Summer Youth Camp" than a "Summer Youth School". Your primary job is to make sure the students have fun, and if they learn in the process, that's all the better. Cleaning up after each day's activities. Organizing an end of the program ceremony put on by the children for the parents and members of the community in your spare time you can help out with any of the other programs St. Gabriel's offers. One Key Contribution I Made: See the attached document I typed indicating advice for future scholars who choose to work at St. Gabriel's. One Internship Related Challenge: This wasn't a "challenge" so much as it is simply something significant that happened to me while I interned at St. Gabriel's. If you work at St. Gabriel's you will be fully exposed to real, legitimate African-American rural poverty--there is a complete breakdown of the nuclear family, and 84% of the residents receive federal support as their sole source of income. I came away from this experience with a more clarified understanding of poverty, race relations, family values, religion, and policy stances. If you would like more details on my personal experiences with each one of these specific areas, feel free to contact me. But what I mean to express in typing this is simply the fact that you will likely be exposed to a similar "clarification experience" in these areas if you choose to work at St. Gabriel's.

Who Might Be Well-Suited for this Position-- Someone who enjoys working with children, who is creative, physical, and outgoing. Someone interested in poverty, education, rural living, or governmental programs that interact with these things. Someone who loves games, and is organized, because you will essentially be creating a program from scratch. I can speak to my fellow males when I say that these children have very few, if any, positive male role-models in their lives, so I feel at least one male should be there, in addition to at least one female. In short, just

think about a perfect camp-counselor who has the organizational skills to create a 6-week program from scratch. That's the perfect person for this.

What one could do (or what resources one could access) to prepare for work with the organization-- Come prepared with ideas for activities or games. Get both a tour of the Delta and of Mound Bayou early on. Understand that these children are at an extremely, extremely low educational level in comparison to their peers nationwide (ex. 6th and 7th graders who can hardly read), so don't get over-ambitious in your preparations. Be openminded, and maybe research Mound Bayou's history and the Delta in general if you'd like to.

Deo Fagnisse (Duke '14)

St Gabriel's Mercy Center offers a variety of services to the community of Mound Bayou, the oldest All Black municipality in the nation. In this city where more than 80% of the inhabitants rely on government welfare as primary source of income, the Mercy Center offers Senior Outreach activities, sewing program, GED training, Social services... During the summer, the center (in collaboration with the Robertson Scholars Program) provides a summer program for kids in the area. For this summer (2011), the Summer Youth Program registered approximately 35 youths from grade 2 through 7. The key responsibilities as summer youth coordinator were: Provide a 'curriculum' and roadmap for the summer; Prepare 'classes' and activities from 9am to 12pm everyday; Keep track of students' attendance and enforce discipline; Implement the 'curriculum' Mondays through Thursdays from 12 to 3 pm; Cleanup facilities used from 3 to 3.30pm; Debrief with the nuns from 3.30 to 4pm; Host an end of summer program show. Personally, for the first five weeks, I tried teaching maths and basic statistics. However, during the last two weeks, the focus shifted towards basic entrepreneurship.

This summer placement is the right one if you are interested in:

Exploring the rich history of the Mississippi Delta

Getting to meet, tutor, have fun with and mentor primary school students

Finding out more about Education, African American Sociology, and the "Most Southern Place on Earth"

Yesi Pedro Vicente (UNC '13)

The St. Gabriel Mercy Center is a nonprofit organization in Mound Bayou that coordinates a variety of programs and ventures. Parents as Teachers, the Summer Enrichment Program, a thrift store, and a GED program are but a few of the services the Center offers. The Mercy Center is run by a group of religious sisters who are very dedicated to the local community. Daily tasks and responsibilities include: Lesson planning-Preparing snacks for the students-Making executive decisions concerning student enrollment, class schedules, and behavior policy-Printing/copying for class-Keeping up to date with reward system for students-Keeping up with behavior/discipline system-Recording student attendance-Preparing and cleaning classroom-Communicating with parents about student's progress-Debriefing and communicating with St. Gabriel Mercy Center staff about day's work and progress

If you choose to intern at the St. Gabriel Mercy Center, be prepared to meet a wonderful group of women who are dedicated to serving Mound Bayou. The staff members at the Mercy Center have such a welcoming attitude and readily take you into their office to chat. The Sisters are wonderful mentors and are willing to work with you to make the internship as satisfying as possible. They gave us the freedom to run the Summer Enrichment Program as we wished while offering tips and advice along the way.

The students you will be working with are a good group. Some of them will refuse to do work or pay attention--that is normal! Keep in mind that some of them are still young and will try to push your buttons. Just be patient and cooperate with them and they will be responsive. On the other hand, some of the students will be gems. They will do the work you assign and will actively participate in classroom activities. All of them will touch your heart.

And a word of advice: communicate with the parents of your students. They really care and are willing to cooperate with you.

Antonio Jackson (UNC '15)

The organization where I worked over the summer was Saint Gabriel Mercy Center. The Mercy Center is a organization located in Mound Bayou, MS that provides many services for its community ranging from a thrift store, financial assistance services , a summer program, an elderly program and a sewing program. Tasks over the summer: Teaching math to 6-14 year olds; Creating engaging and interesting lesson plans; Handling disciplinary issues with students

Dear Future Scholar,

If you so choose to work with the Saint Gabriel Mercy Center get ready for an amazing and rewarding experience. The main advantage of working with the Mercy Center is that you have full creative control over the direction that the summer program takes. This year my fellow scholars and I made the program mostly academic and structured it similarly to regular school , but in past years scholars many other structures for the program. Also the mentors at Saint Gabriel are always willing to listen to any of your concerns and triumphs from your day; in fact everyday we would talk with the Sisters about how our day went. In conclusion, I hope you choose to work with Saint Gabriel and if you have any questions you can ask Yesi, Tom , or I.

Tom Atwood (Duke '13)

The Saint Gabriel Mercy Center is a community center run by the Sisters of Mercy in Mound Bayou, MS. The Center offers several different ministries, including a Sewing Program, Senior Outreach Program, GED Tutoring, Thrift Store, African Clothing Boutique, Computer Lab, and Youth Summer Enrichment Program. As interns, we worked primarily with the Youth Summer Enrichment Program. Responsibilities/Tasks:- Run Youth Summer Enrichment Program (Monday-Thursday, 12-3pm)- Help with other programs at the center as requested (Fridays 9am-4pm, Mon-Thurs 9-noon)- Plan lessons outside of work and/or in the mornings (Monday-Thursday)- Clean the school and debrief with the sisters after program (Monday-Thursday)

St. Gabriel Mercy Center is such an incredible organization! The sisters are as intelligent and experienced as they are sweet and nice. They will help you with pretty much everything you need, and have lots of materials you can use with the kids. As amazing as the sisters are, though, it's the kids that really make this job worthwhile. Although many of them have behavioral issues, the three of us all fell in love with each and every one of them, even those who gave us the most trouble. The one piece of advice I would give is to be flexible, creative, and willing to make changes to your plans. Things can be rather unorganized and hectic, and we had to change our lesson plans on the fly many times.