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Undergraduate Opportunity Spotlight

Carrie Gray

University of Southern Mississippi

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Undergraduate Opportunity Spotlight: The Abbey (L'Abbaye de Pontlevoy)

By Carrie Gray
Staff Writer

For years, The University of Southern Mississippi has offered many renowned study abroad opportunities. The Abbey of Pontlevoy, France is a recent addition to these distinguished programs. The third class of students is studying at the Abbey for the spring semester of 2004. The Abbey Program offers semester-long classes in literature, history, art history, and political science, which are taught in English to Americans from all over the United States. These classes are held in a monastery close to a thousand years old in the heart of France. For these reasons, the Abbey Program is entirely different from all other study-abroad programs offered at Southern Miss.

The Abbey Program is one of a kind, since it is tailored to teach Americans in a non-English speaking country. Students from Southern Miss and all over the United States attend this program and enjoy the luxury of having American teachers and classes taught to them in English, except for the French classes, which are taught by native French teachers. The Abbey Program is perfect for students who do not speak French, and it offers many opportunities to further the French-speaking skills of the students that do. The Abbey Program also offers the comfort and familiarity of forming a community with Americans, while the people, language, romance, and culture of France directly surround the school.

One does not have to leave the Abbey to be touched by the beauties

and mysteries of France. The building itself, along with two elegant chapels, towers over the small village of Pontlevoy, and is a majestic, hauntingly beautiful white structure that houses students, teachers, classrooms, and ballrooms. Several smaller buildings dot the Abbey grounds at the edge of



the vast yards and gardens. A narrow, clear creek winds through the yards, groves of trees, and walkways.

There is enough to explore on The Abbey grounds to occupy oneself for a lifetime. The trees in the grove are knobby, hollow, and mysterious. Through the woods behind the creek is a trail that, in times past, was a secret pathway for the king to utilize in case he ever needed to flee to The Abbey for safety. An underground tunnel burrows under The Abbey to connect opposite ends of the grounds, and a tower stands on the grounds as a testament to the Crusades. At one time this tower served as a prison, and one can still see signatures engraved into its walls from centuries ago.

The Abbey contains a small part of each historical aspect of France and Europe. Its construction was the result of a vow made by a crusader during the Holy Wars. A gigantic tree hugs one of The Abbey's chapels, and both date back to the time before Christopher Columbus discovered the Americas.

For centuries, The Abbey functioned as a school for the elite—George Washington studied at The Abbey. During World War II the Abbey housed Nazis. The history of the known past and a mystery of the unknown past envelop The Abbey, creating an atmosphere of curiosity, which is conducive for learning.

The surrounding town of Pontlevoy enhances the charm of The Abbey. Pontlevoy is a friendly village in the heart of the Loire Valley and is surrounded by vineyards and wide, beautiful countryside. The town consists of farmhouses and narrow roads lined with small shops with apartments above them in which the shop owners live. Pontlevoy also boasts two grocery stores, each the size of a small room, in which one island of products in the middle of the store creates two shopping aisles. A handful of bars and cafes, a few beauty salons, a butcher store, a bakery, and a bookstore also adorn the small streets of Pontlevoy.

Abbey students, used to the fast pace of American life, are plunged into the forcefully relaxing schedule of small

town France. At The Abbey, one's life bends to the schedule of Pontlevoy. The stores set their own hours. Most stores have late openings, early closures, leisurely lunch breaks and holidays, and



the majority of stores are closed on Sundays. Restaurants are another dictator of one's schedule; meals in France are a lesson in patience to Americans. There is just no way to rush the courses in a meal, and done properly, eating in France is like an art of enjoying good food and company and savoring the reluctant passage of time.

The Abbey Program is unique because it is an unconventional learning atmosphere. It is not a university in a large city, but a unique school setting in a small town. The program contains the security of being surrounded by Americans and the diversity of several enriching extensions to the French community. One aspect of the program introduces students to French host families, who regularly participate in activities with the students, such as dinner and family outings. Students often take excursions in the Loire Valley to learn, for example, the history of famous chateaux or how goat cheese is made. Also, the students and teachers at The Abbey spend a week of classes in Paris. While there, the students reside in an international dormitory and travel with their classmates and teachers to Parisian educational sites. They visit

sites such as memorials, museums, and famous historical landmarks and are free to tour and roam at will. After their week's stay in Paris, the students are released on a two-week spring

break. From Paris, they can access all of Europe by train. Students can also maximize travel opportunities on the weekends, since there are no classes on Fridays. Through these diverse activities, The Abbey Program provides students with frequent changes of scenery, intimate

connections with the French community, and ample opportunities to travel.

I studied at the Abbey for the spring semester of 2003, and because Pontlevoy was such a friendly and accessible town, my friends and I explored it endlessly. I made lasting friendships with my host family, who frequently involved me in their daily and family activities. They allowed me to learn about French family life and to see how French operates on the colloquial level. I grew more independent as I navigated Paris and Europe and developed confidence as I formed friendships and created memorable traveling experiences over linguistic, cultural, and country barriers. For me and the other students, The Abbey Program offered the right amount of small-town life and big-city travel, American and French communities, and traditional classroom learning and hands-on experiential learning. Because of my experiences in The Abbey Program, I am indefinitely changed. I will always be grateful that I had the opportunity to participate in such a wonderful life-learning experience at The Abbey.