Spring break is traditionally the time when college students, particularly those from colder climates, head south for fun in the sun. For many, there will be a beach involved. But eight students from the College of St. Benedict and St. John’s University in central Minnesota instead chose to spend their free time at Utah State University’s Center for Persons with Disabilities, doing volunteer work, learning about the culture in Utah and spending time with people served by CPD programs.

Most had no experience interacting or working with people with disabilities. This is the fourth year that college students from outside of Utah have traveled to the CPD to volunteer, and the second year in a row for CSB/SJU students participating in their schools’ Alternative Break Experience (ABE). This week, the students boarded two vans and headed to Salt Lake City to do some work at CReATE, or Citizens Reutilizing Assistive Technology Equipment. CReATE is an initiative of the CPD’s Utah Assistive Technology Program now housed at the Utah Center for Assistive Technology. CReATE refurbishes donated mobility equipment like power wheelchairs and scooters, then provides them to people who need them at a much lower cost than new. According to program coordinator Alma Burgess, the program serves people who don’t have a lot of money, or who may have used up all of their insurance or Medicaid benefits. “We take a device, or maybe two or three, and take them apart and put them together to make one device,” Burgess said. “If a donated device can’t be refurbished at a reasonable price, it gets recycled.” Nothing goes out the door for more than $500, said Burgess, and half of that cost is usually batteries for the device. The money that is collected from consumers is called a service fee, and covers the technician’s time for cleaning and refurbishing the device, as well as any new parts that must be purchased. It’s a significant savings when new power chairs can cost up to $30,000 or more, he said. Zachary Thompson works 24 hours a week at CReATE, and until recently, picked up donations and made deliveries in addition to refurbishing equipment. With his time so limited, Thompson relies on volunteers like the CSB/SJU students to help keep the warehouse organized and maintained.

Last year, volunteers from CSB/SJU and from Grand Valley State University in Michigan gave the equivalent of three weeks’ worth of Thompson’s hours to CReATE. On Wednesday, the students untangled battery charger cords and wrapped them with zip ties, removed battery cables from junk batteries and stripped usable parts from chairs destined for the recycling center. They also cleaned out a storage area and moved some shelving units. In addition to the trip to CReATE, the students packed their spring break week with a visit to Temple Square and sightseeing in Salt Lake City and snowshoeing at Beaver Mountain with Common Ground. They also observed a music therapy class, met with OPTIONS for Independence, had breakfast with students from Project PEER and spent time with participants at the Developmental Skills Lab. Katie Johnson, a senior sociology major, is the only member of the group who came to the CPD last year, and says service work is an important part of her life. She hasn’t had a lot of experience with people with disabilities, she said, but is planning a career in the medical field, so this trip is valuable. A friend of Yixi (Stacey) Chen, a senior accounting major, was a co-leader for the trip to the CPD last year and strongly recommended the experience. “It’s my last year in college and I wanted to do something interesting and enjoy the rest of the school year,” she said. It’s her first trip to Utah, and her first time working with people with disabilities. “I feel like we really did a lot to help them,” she said. “If you treat them like normal people, like a friend, it’s awesome.” Senior nursing major Alisha Voigt, said she wants to gain more experience in working
with people with disabilities before she starts her career. “I wanted to be more confident with people with disabilities … get to know them as people before they become my patients,” she said. The trip to CReATE, and stripping the usable parts from donated chairs, brought back memories of being with her dad and fixing things in the garage. She also learned why reutilizing assistive technology is so important. “You see people in wheelchairs and you don’t think about how hard it is for people to get them,” she said.

Spring break students untangled and organized the CReATE warehouse. Erin Speltz, a sophomore peace studies major, had a lot of volunteer experience in high school, but hasn’t been able to volunteer as much as she would like to in college. “This is an experience I can’t get on a regular basis,” she said. She was worked with people with disabilities in settings where the focus was not on their disabilities, but has not had much experience with people who have physical disabilities. She currently works in a theatre where she provides listening devices or other accommodations to people with disabilities. You’ll always have to be around people with disabilities, she said, and she needed more experience so that it could be integrated into all aspects of her life. And at CReATE, she said with a smile, she learned how to use a wrench.

Sophomore chemistry and Spanish major Katherine Maguire is involved in a service organization at school, and has wanted to go on an ABE trip for the last two years. She’s never worked with people with disabilities, so the week at the CPD has been “awesome,” she said. Kaylee Larson, a sophomore nursing major, works in the office at school that coordinates all the ABE trips. She works with people with disabilities at her summer job, but always sees them in more of a home setting. “It’s interesting to see them in more of a school setting,” she said. Senior math major Shannon Lane and junior computer science major Andrew Zurn found the experience to be a little different than they expected. “I thought it would be more working with kids instead of doing projects, but it’s good, we’re helping people,” Lane said. “I’m grateful for the snowshoeing trip with Common Ground,” Zurn said. “It was a lot of fun. It’s definitely been a great experience, one that I’m happy for.” For more photos of the CReATE trip, visit our Facebook photo gallery here.