Where The Heck Is Piney Woods?

One wall of my apartment in Iowa Hall (one of the girls’ dormitories) is covered with photographs. The girls look curiously at my family, friends, the summer camp where I worked and postcards. One photo, in a cheap plastic frame, caught my eye the other day. It would not leave my mind...

It is of my five best friends and me--taken last May in Vermont, where we’d escaped for a farewell "bonding." It was a weekend of reminiscing and anxious promises to keep in touch. The "end"--of calculus, boys we’d known since elementary school, protective parents, life in our too small suburb--was so close. Graduation was a mere month away. We could taste freedom--parties, adventures, curfewless weekends, independence...

In the photo I wore a sweatshirt with YALE--my future college--emblazoned across the front of it.

All six of us are college bound. From New Hampshire to Washington, D.C., we form a neat dotted line down the East Coast.

September came. And as they left for their colleges in the sky, I frantically searched for my place. Yale would have to wait. I had given myself one year. One year to see a different life, to learn unwritten lessons, to offer my time and energy to others. A circuitous path brought me here...

To Piney Woods. A dot out of the line. To the deep South, where I had never been. To pastoral beauty--where dusk is deep purple skys, outlined in rose. To large, rolling pastures, separated from the flat highway by perfect white fences. To expanses of green studded with massive cows. To a campus of grey brick buildings, tall, elegant pines and green grass mowed and tended, neat and orderly.

The American flag, waving in front of the Piney Woods post office, reminds me that indeed I am still in America. The magnitude of this nation makes it possible to leave an affluent suburb of doctors and lawyers--a suburb with many Jews and virtually no racial diversity--and arrive at an all black institution and still be "at home." Home--but one with lots of fried chicken and no bagels; with pop and no soda; with a slower pace and a stronger presence of faith.

These were the tangible, describable differences between Piney Woods, Mississippi, and Woodbridge, Connecticut. But I had not come to take photos or write a travel journal. No, I had come to feel, to help, to learn, to love... to change.

As I tutored the Piney Woods students in math, chemistry and English, about applying for college, and reading the newspaper, and realizing their potential, they taught me. And while I faltered, they never did.

They have given me so much. I’ve sung with them. I’ve prayed with them. I’ve eaten with them. I’ve laughed with them. I’ve cried with them. I’ve disagreed with them. I’ve felt angry with them. I’ve loved them. To observe them, to talk with them, to live with them has inspired thoughts, stirred emotions, and dedicated me... to what?

I cannot say for certain. I don’t know what my future holds... I will work with people--in the rural country? In the inner-city? Teach? Make laws?... Whatever I do, wherever I go, the hearts of these students, the spirit of this place will be with me.

To Piney Woods, I will say, "where my eyes were opened and my heart was stirred."