

The “Corps” of the Matter

Reconnecting Today’s Youth with the Natural World

By Captain Peyton Taylor

They came for a variety of reasons.

“I love to be outside,” said many applications.

“I love to work with my hands,” said others.

“I want to learn to be a team player... discover more about nature...help my family pay bills... improve my community...”

Some young adults were hoping to learn more about green jobs; others just wanted to meet new people and have fun.

Lofty Goals and High Aspirations

Where could a teenager go and hope to accomplish all of these things and more?

The Maryland Civic Justice Corps (CJC) is one place that offers an opportunity for motivated young people to learn valuable skills, give back to the community and have a great time doing it.

Last spring, Governor Martin O’Malley tasked the Maryland Park Service with the challenge of realizing his vision of a new kind of conservation corps; one specifically geared toward providing employment opportunities for underserved Maryland teens and beginning the important work of reconnecting today’s youth with the natural world.

For six weeks last summer, some 200 youth reported to Gunpowder Falls and Patapsco Valley State Parks to take part in conservation service projects like restoring state park facilities and wildlife habitat. During the course of the six-week program, the participants painted and restored over 28 public buildings in Maryland State Parks, improved more than 11 miles of hiking trails, removed tons of trash and debris from parks, rivers and streams and planted over 100 trees.

While doing the work, the teens learned basic carpentry, landscaping and additional valuable job skills, including those that would help prepare them for work in an increasingly green economy. They also participated in enrichment activities aimed at building self-confidence, team work and other important life lessons. At the same time, they learned about the natural world and truly enjoyed their time in the outdoors.

More than Just the Numbers

Although the amount of work completed by the CJC was extraordinary, the success of the program should not just be measured by the numbers. The real value lies in the many ways that the young people involved matured during their time as Corps members. Comparisons of surveys taken by participants before and after their Corp experience revealed that the number of youth who envisioned themselves completing college more than doubled during the six weeks that they were a part of the program.

Getting to know these remarkable teens, hearing their stories, and watching them grow through the summer was an inspiring and unforgettable experience for everyone involved.

Corps members were expected to abide by a code of conduct that upheld the principles of respect and honesty. They committed to a program structure that required compliance

to Corp policy, punctuality and regular attendance. Even with the growing pains that are expected when dealing with teens — many of them having their first work experience — they rose to meet every test and every participant’s sense of accomplishment increased with every challenge that they met.

Working Hard...Playing Harder

Even while they were tackling jobs that challenged them mentally and physically, CJC youth learned to enjoy the great outdoors.

Research has shown that time spent in the outdoors is vital to the healthy development of children. Time in nature



CJC youth learned how to be better stewards of the environment by improving hiking trails and other facilities in Maryland State Parks.



Landscaping is rewarding work that can lead to a great career in the outdoors, making communities healthier and more beautiful.

is instrumental in building cognitive and creative skills, and helps to combat serious health risks such as childhood obesity, diabetes and depression.

Learning to paddle a canoe, camping in tents under the starry skies of Garrett County or simply marveling at the delicate detail of a butterfly's wing were considered important business at CJC. When a Corps member discovered a snapping turtle egg in a pile of warm mulch, the work of mulching the hiking trail came to a stop, so that the business of appreciating a tiny miracle of nature could take place. Even veteran park rangers were deeply moved when they experienced nature through the wide eyes of a fascinated teenager seeing it all for the first time. Experiences like these will help nurture and grow a new generation of youth who are willing and able to advocate for a healthy environment and healthy natural resources as adults.

Magic

There was a special feeling in the air on the August day when the 2008 Maryland Civic Justice Corps class graduated. Governor

O'Malley delivered the commencement address and personally recognized the CJC youth for their tremendous accomplishment. A sense of magic filled the air as staff, Corps members, parents and others gathered under the trusses of the pavilion at North Point State Park to celebrate these special young people. Everyone present knew that the source of that magic was each and every proud graduate of the Maryland Civic Justice Corps.

Moving Forward

After such a successful year, it was obvious that the work of the CJC would continue. Recruitment has started for the 2009 class. Interested young people may complete their applications by going to www.dnr.maryland.gov/cjc/. Interested adults can also find descriptions of positions available with the CJC.

CJC will be returning to Gunpowder Falls and Patapsco Valley State Parks again this year. The program is also expanding into Harford and Prince George's Counties and is recruiting for positions at each of

these locations. This year's emphasis is on tree planting as part of Governor O'Malley's Marylanders Grow Trees initiative. The Maryland Civic Justice Corps also welcomes Maryland Park Service's Outdoor Discovery program, who will be joining CJC this year, to plan and provide enrichment activities for youth.

The Maryland Conservation Corps and the Maryland Park Service (MPS) work with many partners in the community to make this program a reality. The Parks and People Foundation, the Baltimore City Public School System, the Mayor's Office of Employee Development and the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services are just a few of the key partners who contribute valuable time and expertise to the effort.

The results have been, and will continue to be, truly remarkable. ■

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