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Juvenile offenders pay back victims, nature

Youths in Project Payback help restore Gladstone riverfront

By Ellen Spitaleri - Pamplin Media Group, Mar 17, 2011



Photo by Christopher Onstott / Pamplin Media Group

Jessie, 16, plants a tree at Meldrum Bar Park in Gladstone as part of Project Payback, which enables juvenile offenders to give back to their community.

Where the Clackamas and Willamette rivers meet near Gladstone's Meldrum Bar Park, two types of restoration work are under way. Volunteers are replacing invasive species with Northwest native plants. And many of those volunteers are juvenile offenders giving back to their community – and earning money to provide restitution to victims of their crimes.

They're "good kids who made bad decisions," says Mark McDonnell, a supervisor for Project Payback, a 15-year-old program of the Clackamas County Juvenile Department. The youths earn stipends that are paid directly to the county general fund, which then pays back the victims of crimes committed by the young offenders.

"I'm not used to hard labor, but this program has been my life since September 2009," says Kayla, 18, one of many young offenders working at the park on a recent cold, rainy Saturday. "It is part of a new beginning for me," she says. "I have challenged myself and found out what I am capable of."

McDonnell says the project emphasizes the "restorative concepts" of juvenile justice. He recalls one young offender with a "mischief background" who made a picnic table for one of the county parks, and then brought his family to see the table and have a picnic.

"Somebody had graffitied the table and the kid was angry; he had an 'aha' moment," McDonnell says.

"There is magic in this," he says. Young offenders get vocational skills that can connect them to an employment program. They also get to work with other community members and gain an appreciation for the environment.

“This is not just feel-good stuff. This has a direct impact on the youth – which results in reducing the chances of them committing more crimes,” McDonnell says.

Russ Hall, executive director of Wilderness International, a nonprofit set up in 2004 to promote conservation through active participation, is at the center of the environmental transformation taking place at Meldrum Bar Park. His program is managing crews of Gladstone residents, veterans, a nonprofit organization and juvenile offenders. More than 80 percent of the young people working with Hall are part of Project Payback.

Getting down and dirty

Thanks largely to the juvenile offenders and other volunteers, the entrance to Meldrum Bar Park, near the restrooms, has been transformed from an illegal dump site into a demonstration garden. A second area, near the boat docks, has been cleared of invasives and is being replanted with native species. A group of veterans comes in once a month and removes ivy from both sites.

Hall is particularly proud of the native habitat demonstration garden that his young work crews have built. They have put in 1,000 native plants like salal and wild ginger. An integral part of the demonstration garden is signage identifying the plants, Hall says, “so that people know what native habitat looks like.”

This spring, crews will begin taking out grass on a plot near the garden and planting that area with natives. That will save the city the expense of mowing the grass, and it will be more beneficial for the ecosystem, Hall says.

At the second site near the boat ramps, juvenile offenders assemble every Saturday, rain or shine, to continue removing blackberry and English ivy, and planting Douglas firs, red cedars and other native trees.

There is plenty more to do. Crews will build hiking trails, clear more invasives and cover the ground with bark mulch to inhibit new growth. They also will partner with the Rinearson Creek Restoration Coalition to help that neighborhood group restore the health and habitat of nearby Rinearson Creek.

Hall has been working with Project Payback since 2006, when he first took some at-risk youth to the White River Wildlife Area, in Central Oregon’s Tygh Valley, to assist the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife on a conservation project. The trip was a hit, so Hall has added more opportunities for youth to get involved with community conservation projects.

The juvenile department pays Wilderness International to organize and run the Project Payback crew, while the city of Gladstone pays the stipends for the youth workers. For the Meldrum Bar Park project, the city pays about \$300 a day for the young work crews to come to the park; a landscaper would charge two to three times that amount, McDonnell says.

Payoff at the park

Meldrum Bar Park is one of the busiest in Clackamas County, attracting about 92,000 boaters a year to its docks, says Scott Tabor, Gladstone public works supervisor.

At 70 acres, including 11 acres recently certified as a natural area, the park is simply too big for Tabor and his crew to maintain. So he depends on volunteers.

Gladstone provides financial support, heavy equipment and fencing materials to Wilderness International. Often Tabor and his crew show up on their days off to assist the young people.

“There is less vandalism in the park now, because Russ and his group have cleared out the invasives, creating more open spaces,” Tabor says. Crews also built fences at both sites to discourage dumping.

The project is paying off for the youth offenders as well.

Jessie, 16, says the best part is getting to contribute positively to her community.

“I like to do the little things to make this park look beautiful,” she says. “I’ve learned how to build fences, spread bark dust and plant trees.”

Zane, 17, who has been in Project Payback for three years, says he’s learned communication skills and how to play a leadership role.

Pat Greene and Linda Bevers are two of the adult volunteer “community guides” who work with Wilderness International and Project Payback.

“Over the last two years, I see all these kids go home feeling like they have accomplished something. They appreciate that they have this opportunity to take care of their fines; this gives them work experience and they can get references,” Bevers says.

Wilderness International and Project Payback let “kids know that they are important, that they are making a difference and that there will be benefits down the road,” Greene says,

Volunteering for the program is important, he says, because kids need to know that people care for them.

Check it out

- *Wilderness International:* www.wildernessintl.com ; or call 503-593-0199 and ask for Russ Hall, executive director

- *Project Payback:* www.co.clackamas.or.us/csc/youth.jsp .

- *Join a work party at Meldrum Bar Park on Saturday, April 30, from 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., with a pizza feed following the work time. All are invited to attend.*