

Digging for a cause

BY ELLEN SPITALERI

The Clackamas Review, Jan 25, 2011, Updated Jan 25, 2011

It was cold — it was wet, and last month probably most of their peers were indoors savoring the last few days of holiday break. But for eight young people and three adults, several rainy days were devoted to community service, including digging up and transplanting 40 ferns.



The group rode up to a mist-enshrouded forested area just outside Estacada to dig up mature ferns and their root systems; the Forest Service gave the group a special permit to do the digging along a narrow, twisty logging road.

Then it was on to Cross Park, along the fast-flowing Clackamas River in Gladstone, to replant the ferns on a steeply sloping hillside, where invasive species had recently been removed. The ferns are the first step in establishing more native habitat at the site, which will also help maintain a healthy watershed as rain water flows into the river.

Six of the young people, ranging in age from 14 to 18, were part of the Clackamas County Juvenile Department's ICE program, while two more were doing community service with Wilderness International, a local non-profit.

ICE program

"ICE stands for Individual and Community Empathy," said Rachel Pearl, community connections coordinator for the CCJD.

"It allows youth an opportunity to repair the harm caused to our community, and in a meaningful way develop relationships with community mentors. It also allows them to develop skills, both in interpersonal communication and hands-on," she said.

All six of the young people "have made mistakes and are in the process of turning their lives around," Pearl added.

The youth in the ICE program participate in a four-hour group session, where they talk about what happens when people do harm and the benefits that repairing harm can have "in a positive way, as their crime did in a negative way," she said.

Then the young people put in 20 to 24 hours of community service, including being part of an outdoor work crew. And finally they have a graduation, where they talk about what they learned, and how important it is for individuals to have a positive impact on their community.

"I tell them 95 percent of what they do is positive, and [ICE projects] are a way for them to show people their positive side," Pearl noted.

ICE participants work on 130 projects per month, only within the county, so "they are able to make relationships within the communities where they live," she said.

The projects show the young people the value that they can provide to the community, which in turn "sustains the community," and they are "recognized for the positive things they do. It gives the community a chance to see them not just as young offenders, but as positive community members as well," Pearl added.

'Sense of accomplishment'

"Having us do this gives us a sense of accomplishment," said Kayla, 18, one of the members of the ICE work party.

“It forces us to go outside our comfort zone and helps build character; challenges us to do things we didn’t know we could do,” she added.

Both Justin, 14, and Kelly, 18, noted that the ICE program allows them to be outdoors helping the community, and gives them tools to make better decisions in their lives.

Pearl said that hers is the only paid position in the program, and added that she is always looking for more community volunteers, called community guides, and more projects to work on.

After the young people planted the ferns at Cross Park, the ICE participants moved on to the Hopkins Demonstration Forest in Oregon City to sort firewood, and then on to the Fill-a-Stocking warehouse to help that group sort out the after-holidays disorder, Pearl noted.

Wilderness International

Wilderness International is a nonprofit organization founded in 2004, said Russ Hall, the executive director. The organization describes itself as: “Conservation through active participation.”

His group runs community service projects for the Clackamas Community Juvenile Department on a continual basis, including the week during holiday break. Young people working with Wilderness International may be doing community service hours for a variety of reasons, and last week, in addition to gathering and planting ferns, they removed invasive vegetation at Meldrum Bar Park, worked on the fencing to protect the natural areas in the parks and regraded the nature trail at Meldrum Bar Park.

“Wilderness International does this work with the community service youth from CCJD, because it is at the very heart of our mission, [to give] people from all walks of life an opportunity to experience and care for nature. These young people tend to be hard workers and eager to learn about restoring native habitat,” Hall said.

In the past two years, summer and fall youth work crews constructed new fences throughout Cross Park, removed invasive vegetation, built retainer walls, installed a sprinkler system to water the new native plants during dry summer months and built a trail, Hall noted.

He added, “Scott Tabor, supervisor of Public Works in Gladstone, and his crew have worked with us to teach the youth many skills including community relations, sprinkler system design and installation, basic construction, horticulture, etc. We also have daily assistance from adult volunteers from all across the community.”

The ultimate vision for Cross Park is to establish a large segment of natural area along the river that can be experienced by people and wildlife, he noted, adding that youth work crews still have some trail improvement, construction and invasive-plant removal to do.

Once native plants are established, “the native habitat will be somewhat self sustaining. Groups will go in occasionally to remove any new invasive growth and easily maintain the native habitat, and healthy native habitat helps to maintain a healthy watershed that benefits us all,” Hall added.

'Something special'

During the fern-gathering activity, Danny Swor, program development intern with Wilderness International, worked with Michael, 18, and Margarita, 17, two Gladstone residents doing community service work.

“There is something special about being outdoors; everyone’s vulnerable, especially on days like today. But it is beautiful, and we get to work together to give back to the community,” he said, adding that he was “one of these kids once, and it is important to learn to work hard.”

“I made a mistake in the past and now I am doing community service; I’m outdoors helping the environment to keep it clean for people in the future,” Michael noted, while Margarita added that she likes “being part of something that has to do with the environment and for everyone.”

As the activity finished and the young people departed, a nearby neighbor woman thanked the group for its hard work, while Rich Vandegraft, another neighbor, described the Cross Park project as a “win-win” effort.

He added, “It makes a big difference — these kids have gotten a lot out of this. You take these kids out to dig ferns and that is something they will never forget, and at the end of the day, you have a nicer little park.”

- Contact Rachel Pearl, community connections coordinator for the Clackamas County Juvenile Department’s ICE program, at 503-655-8342, ext. 7134, or by e-mail at: rachelpea@co.clackamas.or.us.

Contact Russ Hall, executive director of Wilderness International Inc., at 503-593-0199, or visit the website at <http://www.wildernessintl.com>.