

December 5, 2011

Corps offers hard work, low pay, miserable conditions and a step up in life

Local members share their story

By Sara Seyyidin Journal Staff Writer



Ben Furtado/Auburn Journal

California Conservation Corps member Rontay Barthell maneuvers through the spider web obstacle course blindfolded, while listening to precise directions from fellow member McKinley Glenn during a leadership exercise at their campus in Christian Valley. The exercise teaches upcoming crew leaders how to command a crew while gaining their trust.





Hard work, low pay, miserable conditions may be the California Conservation Corp's motto, but corps members at the Placer Center will tell you it's also a platform for young adults.

The state-run agency marks its 35th anniversary this year, having employed more than 115,000 adults from the ages of 18 to 35. Corps members work on natural resource projects and aid in emergency response for minimum wage.

The trade-off for the rigor of the one to three year program is hands-on job skills and training, the opportunity to earn a high school diploma or GED and scholarship opportunities. They can also live in lower-cost dormitories at the center.

When Placer Center corps member and specialist Roberto Meza of San Diego got laid off from his job at a shipyard a friend told him about "the Cs."

He knew the pay was low, but Meza said the chance to learn on the job was a big incentive. So far, he has earned his welding certificate and worked on a variety of projects from forestry to Caltrans projects. At the end of his first year he was promoted to a specialist.

Meza said aside from the skills he has learned, he has made a diverse group of friends from all over California.

"It's hard work, but it's worth it if you can make it," Meza said. "Working with the people is always the best. You are in smashing, beast-mode in the forest. I like the whole community. One guy is a pure nerd, another is a pure jock."

Away from the familiar hustle of San Diego he has found solitude through his work in the forest. Working in the forest service or as a park ranger are a couple of options Meza is looking at for when he is out of the corps.

"For me, coming from the city, I think I fell in love with the forest. Nature touches your heart a little," Meza said.

Rod Thornhill directs the corps' Placer Center. He said some of his most treasured memories of the program also center around experiencing nature. He remembers flying in on a helicopter in 1980 to blaze trails in Kings Canyon and seeing a butterfly migration in Mendocino.

"I've been doing this for 30 some years. It's been a very rewarding experience," Thornhill said. "Most of it is seeing the young adults develop and move on in life. It's kind of like a platform."

He said aside from their work for government agencies, local corps members help out at fundraisers during their off-hours. The Lions Club recently honored them for their dedication to community service in the Auburn-area.

"It gives them a step up in life," Thornhill said. "Plus, it provides them an opportunity to give back to the State of California and the community."

Reach Sara Seyyidin at saras@goldcountrymedia.com.

Corps members learn job skills

Work in state parks, firefighting among options

By Sara Seyyidin Journal Staff Writer

The California Conservation Corps may only employ young adults for one to three years, but along the way they learn skills they can use for a lifetime.

Auburn's Christian Valley is home to the Placer Center of the corps.

The organization's partnership with numerous others makes it more effective. Sierra College is one of its partners, which helped Placer Center corps member Roberto Meza earn his welding certificate.

John Muir Charter School helps some members work toward graduating high school. Any non-graduates are required to continue their education and earn a GED, according to Rod Thornhill, director of the Placer Center.

Karla Lozano, a teacher for John Muir Charter School, said they hold a special high school graduation ceremony for corps members in Northern California.

"We mentor them and teach them life skills, too," Lozano said of her job.

Maya Deloach, 20, is another corps member who happens to be from San Diego. She is just a couple of tests shy of graduating high school now and is studying to pass her test for a driving permit.

"It gives you a lot of structure," Deloach said. "If you come from a more rough background you can learn how to convert that energy you had getting into trouble into positive things."

Stacie Ochoa, 22, originally from Stockton, wants to make her job with the corps a permanent career. She is one of the driving forces behind keeping the busy kitchen running and dining room stocked with good eats.

"I came here because I didn't want to have to rely on anyone else for money. I like working in here because I work with people. You get to know their different personalities," Ochoa said. "I try to boost their self-esteem and confidence up and show them I believe in them."

Thornhill said that's exactly what the California Conservations Corps aims to do, too. Many of his former corps members have good jobs and families now.

"They work for state parks, the department of corrections, some of them are in politics," Thornhill said. "It's a different experience for folks."

Reach Sara Seyydin at saras@goldcountrymedia.com.