

5/13/10

California youths find their future in Christian Valley

California Conservation Corps campus offers new start

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Cheri March/Colfax Record

John Muir Charter School teachers Mary Schreiber, left and Karla Lozano, in back, lead a small class of corps members in their studies. From left, students are Anthony Van Dyke, Jeremyt Bagola, Donavon Suarez, Unique Jones and Mat Jacobs.



From the dorms to the classroom to the cafeteria, the Christian Valley center could be just another college campus.

Except for the fact that its occupants are also learning to clear brush, build trails and use chainsaws.

As one of 27 statewide centers for the California Conservation Corps, the former mining camp at the end of Christian Valley Road now serves as part boot camp, part internship for more than 80 men and women, ages 18 to 25.

Corps members are hired for approximately a year, during which time they perform construction, conservation and emergency response work for state agencies and local governments.

"They come into the program needing direction and they learn the skills necessary to become a more productive citizen," said center director Rod Thornhill.

Colfax resident Donavon Suarez, 18, joined the corps after struggling to find a job.

"I would have found (work) eventually, but it probably would have been something I didn't really want to do, like fast food," Suarez said.

With the CCC, Suarez not only gets paid but also has been able to develop resume-boosting life experience for his career goal – following in the footsteps of his forestry service parents.

Though Suarez learned of the corps from family members, many locals aren't aware the CCC exists in their backyard, said Jimmy Camp, the corps' communication director.

But for the young men and women working and studying there – many of whom hail from far corners of the state – the seclusion is the perfect setting for a fresh start.

"A lot of corps members want to get away from where they were before," Camp said. "It could be gangs. It could be their home situation – sometimes they just want to start over. This (center) is tucked away in the woods, so it's very conducive to that."

Like about half of corps members, 20-year-old Mat Jacobs joined without a high school diploma after slipping through the cracks in the public school system.

"There were 4,000 kids at my school," said Jacobs, who grew up in the fast-growing Central California town of Hollister. "It was just cluttered."

Compare that to a class of about 40 in the on-site John Muir Charter School where corps members study 10 hours weekly.

"A lot of students feel like they're finally getting the attention here they didn't receive before," said Mary Schreiber, who shares teaching duties with Karla Lozano.

Three months after joining the program, Jacobs received his GED. A year later, he finally earned his diploma as well as a promotion to the higher-ranking position of crew leader.

He has earned a \$4,500 scholarship from AmeriCorps, which he plans to put towards the fire science technology program at Sierra College.

"This has been a long time coming," Jacobs said.

Along with work and school, corps members are required to complete nearly 50 hours of volunteer work.

CCC crews frequently assist local organizations – for instance, corps members recently helped the Colfax Garden Club start a community garden – and volunteer at events like the Amgen Tour of California, American River Confluence Festival and other Placer County functions.

But many corps members are most proud of the overlook deck and trail system they built at Hidden Falls Regional Park in rural Auburn.

Whether it's through nature protection or performing energy-reducing retrofits like solar panel installations, the CCC has always been rooted in conservation, said Thornhill.

"We were green before green became a buzzword," he said.

And they'll get even greener in July, when the Christian Valley center begins a partnership with Sierra College to offer energy technology courses to prepare students for jobs in the sustainable energy industry.

Seeing corps members improve the world around them is one of the reasons Thornhill has stuck with program since joining as a basic corps member 30 years ago.

"(The CCC) provides the opportunity to make a difference not only in corps members' lives, but in the lives of their family and community," he said.

Some corps members, like 26-year-old Nichol Rodriguez, are following Thornhill's example and staying on as staff.

"I like the program," said Rodriguez, a Sacramento native. "People come here for different reasons. I had been taking care of my mom for several years; I was 22 years old and not going anywhere in life. I needed to start on my own."

For Rodriguez, the CCC has been more than a job.

"You have to learn to live with the individuals you see every day, so it teaches you to communicate and solve problems without conflict," she said. "You learn a lot within the community itself. You can't go wrong with any new experience, but with this program, I've been able to make a life for myself."