

SEEDS Youth Conservation Corps ready for hire

Local program employs teens, benefits environment

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A SEEDS crew of, from left, Kimora Stevens, 17, crew leader Britt Uecker, Bella Canfield, 17, Hannah Steffers, 16, Christian Stevens, 18, and Constance Burnam, 18, built a dance floor from reclaimed dock wood at the Duneswood Resort in Empire.

Record-Eagle/Jan-Michael Stump

EMPIRE — A pair of teens heaved an old, wooden dock onto its side and lifted it onto a tractor forklift. Debbie Duhoski revved the engine and drove the thing up a nearby hill so it can be re-purposed as part of a new dancing deck behind Duneswood Resort in rural Leelanau County.

The teens worked hard on the construction project in Monday's summer warmth and sunshine as part of their jobs with the SEEDS Youth Conservation Corps. They earn a good hourly wage, work outdoors, build career skills and receive an education grant for \$1,200 at the season's end. It's a grant-supported program for at-risk teens, through which area residents and organizations can hire a youth conservation crew to help with any number of both small and big projects.

"I'd rather be doing this than working a register," said Constance Burnam, 18, of Traverse City. "I like being outside. And you learn a lot about the stuff in your area, the plants and such."

This is Burnam's fourth year in the youth conservation corps and she said her favorite project among all those years — so far — was a historic barn restoration in Port Oneida Rural Historic District, part of the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. The crew members learned about all the various buildings there and the historical significance of the site, she said.

Burnam said in the autumn she will leave for boot camp as a new recruit in the U.S. Marine Corps. She's not the only multi-year member of the youth conservation corps, either. Both Chris and Kiki Stevens, 18 and 17 respectively, are siblings from Traverse City who are both in their second year in the youth conservation corps.

"It's a good job — not stuck behind a desk because that's boring," Chris Stevens said. "I get to work in the environment, beautify the environment, give back to it as much as we can because we aren't here forever. The trees will be here long after we're gone."

His sister agreed, nearly identically.

"I don't like being in a restaurant or an office sitting still," Kiki Stevens said. "I like being outdoors, making things nice for others."

Chris Stevens is off to study criminal justice at Ferris State University in the fall, while his sister will be a senior in high school.

Duhoski said she hired a youth conservation corps crew last year to clear away more than 200 fallen trees from the severe storm of Aug. 2, 2015. They did so well she brought them back this year for some more work around her motel and private property.

"Attitude is everything. They always are so professional and so easy and fun to work with," she said.

Duhoski said she also is keen to help these teens build strong futures for themselves by developing work skills while young. "I know these kids are at risk and I want them to know there are people in the community who care about them," she said.

Bella Canfield, 17, of Traverse City, said she learned about the program from guest speakers at the Traverse Bay Area Intermediate School District's Career-Tech Center. She said seeing the "before and after" of projects is satisfying, and working in the youth conservation corps allows her to see much of the region, including her first trip out on Old Mission Peninsula since she was a young child.

"You might get to see the water, look out while working. It's nice," she said.

Britt Uecker is a SEEDS youth conservation corps crew leader who said the program helps the teens build job, leadership and team-building skills while doing somewhat strenuous outdoor activity. They also learn "soft skills" such as being accountable for an employment time card, she said.

Program Manager Jennifer Flynn said the program is designed to provide training to at-risk youth who may not otherwise have the opportunity to work in ecological careers. She said since the youth conservation corps launched in 2009, more than 450 summer jobs for youth have been created, \$300,000 in scholarships distributed and \$1.3 million in gross wages paid to local youth.

The crews can be hired at a reasonable rate for projects such as ecologically appropriate landscaping, construction for landscaping and outdoor living, trail maintenance and construction, pollinator installations, historic renovations, invasive plant removal and other types of farm, vineyard and orchard assistance. There also is moving, painting, clearing, cleaning and more.

The program is modeled after the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s New Deal. Multiple state and federal agencies have supported the effort with grants, along with organizations such as the Brookby Foundation and the Oleson Foundation.