

Garden from A1

still finishing up their duties.

With an initial crew of nine people, KCC has been operating the last part of the summer with a core crew of four people. Though instilling a positive work ethic is a main theme of the program, the issue of retaining student commitment is an ever-present challenge.

"Sometimes they can't show up because they can't get transportation," Hall explained. "But it depends on what job your doing. Sometimes you only need two people."

The KCC will often work in collaboration with other agencies such as the U.S. Forest Service, Umpqua National Forest's Cottage Grove Ranger District and the BLM.

"We can do other work for even private organizations on a fee-for-service operation," said Hall. "So we can pay the crew on a reimbursable time card which the district bills to whoever we're working for."

Payment from Lane County jobs in particular helps fund student field trips and various projects.

Last year, the crew was tasked with helping extract sudden weed growth from the new Harrison Elementary School landscape. A Community Stewardship Corp grant from the Oregon Youth Conservation Corps (OYCC) enabled the KCC to work on school district property.

Additional funding from the Ford Foundation allowed the crew to tackle the weed problem during their eight-week summer program as well.

This summer wasn't all about weeding, however. Other tasks involved mowing vegetation on the Row River Trail bike path, native seed collection and garden work.

For one recent graduate from AKHS, bridge deconstruction on Fairview Creek Trail for the U.S. Forest Service was a highlight of the summer.

"I've never done something like that," said crew member Melinda Kane. "That was a good challenge."

This year's snowstorm had destroyed much of the

bridge and destabilized its foundation and the crew was tasked with tearing the remains of the bridge apart.

Although last school year had a low turnout, Hall is hopeful that more will join this year as he advertises the program's benefits.

An influx of funding may help with that.

Though a contract with the U.S. Forest Service has expired, the KCC gets material and wages funding to the tune of \$12,000 a year with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and a multi-year agreement with BLM for \$31,000 through the year 2020.

They have also recently applied for a government grant which could see the program receiving \$30,000 a year for three years.

OYCC funding is used to pay student wages, buy safety equipment and material and also provide college tuition vouchers to students who successfully complete programs.

The OYCC was created by the Oregon Legislature in 1987 to build strong connections between work experiences, work skills, personal responsibility, commitment to education and future employment for Oregon's youth. The organization targets disadvantaged or at-risk youths to provide a framework for meaningful work with public value.

Such goals are also in line with a core theme at AKHS: giving back to the community.

The garden, for instance, provides some food for the school district kitchen and even for student families. They also provide food for the weekly Soup's On event on Sundays at the Community Center.

Currently, there is an orchard growing that will eventually bear fruit to add to the community pot.

"We also make a lot of birdhouses for outdoor school," said Hall.

Building Futures

In addition to community projects, the students themselves receive a slew of benefits from the program.

By completing the program, graduates can conceivably arrive at college with up to 12 credits already under their belt.

Students also have the opportunity to meet professionals in various fields

and learn about careers in areas such as environmental science and natural resources. Through jobs with Lane County, students meet operators of heavy machinery and learn how they function.

Some students who have gone through KCC have continued on to get apprenticeships through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act program.

"Most recently we've got a student who just got his second part-time job with the county," said Hall. "His endeavor is to become a full-time member of the county workforce."

Education is also a large part of the program. Many activities involve hands-on learning experiences in various subjects like environmental science and math which has seen students measuring pH levels in soil, identifying plants, building structures for rainwater collection and studying chemical compositions.

"He has definitely taught me more about plants than any other individual in my life," Kane said of Hall.

Kane joined the KCC last summer and continued working through the following school year and summer break.

"It teaches you good work ethic, I think, just being forced to get up and be in the sun for six hours at once and being asked to actually work with tools and do something for several hours straight," she said. "It takes energy from you, but it's also what will be expected from you when you get older. ... So I think it's good to give kids an opportunity to get out like that and just get a feel for what it's like to be working in the real world."

For senior Haley Montoya, working on the KCC summer crew was her first job.

"When I first started, I was really, really shy," she said. "Now I'm really confident about myself. Because of the things we've done, I can look back and say, 'Oh, I did that. So I if I did this, I can do that.' It really gives you this motivation in yourself, so it feels really good at the end of the day."

Montoya also spoke highly of the program's impact on the area's youth.

"I think it's really good for the community," she

said. "If you go to this school, certain kids might not have certain opportunities, so you come, you make money and you're getting credit for it. ... It's really good for your mental health, too."

Recent AKHS graduate Wyatt Leach found particular benefit from the program as his previous challenges at Cottage Grove High School saw his grades and attendance suffer, putting his future at risk.

"At CG (High School) I struggled to get help," Leach said. "When I came here, teachers were really one-on-one. ... If you're struggling, they'll seek you out."

The personal engagement Leach experienced at Kennedy set him on a trajectory he said would have been much different otherwise.

"I'd probably be a super-senior," said Leach.

After dropping out of Cottage Grove High School for two weeks, he was told he would have to redo a year. Coming to Kennedy changed that.

"If you have motivation and drive and actually use all these programs they have, you can easily get credit," Leach said.

Leach was struggling particularly in math and met with teachers after school to get caught up, which enabled him to then pass his essential skills test, qualifying him for graduation.

"I passed that on my first try and that's what I was really worried about," he said. "I know I would have been pretty discouraged if I had to do a whole other year. ... It would have been a whole different direction."

Leach's turnaround is in part owed to the experiences he had in the KCC.

"Getting to do such different things in one job," Leach said. "Some days we were doing trail maintenance, some days we were picking weeds for the community, some days we were deconstructing bridges. There was a lot to do and lot of skills we were learning instead of just one set thing like most jobs."

The crew jobs taught Leach to use power saws, reciprocating saws, weed eaters and a variety of other equipment.

"This job taught me how to work long hours outside

in boots and full uniforms, being all sweaty and having to push through," said Leach. "It's a really good program because you can learn a crazy amount of things in a short amount of time."

The program also gave Leach an appreciation for the work he was committed to.

"In the past, I've worked at fast food and retail stores," he said. "What I've noticed that was different from most jobs, in this job I really care about my work because I knew it was going toward something I cared about."

Leach plans on enlisting in the military and later us-

ing the GI Bill and a \$750 OYCC scholarship to pursue interests in zoology or photography.

"I actually want to work with animals and do conservation work in the future," he said.

As the summer crew wraps up its projects, Hall is hoping to have a school-year crew ready as soon as possible.

"I have an open hiring period, so I hire the school year from now through May," he said.

Looking forward to future projects this school year, Hall is prepared for new challenges.

"Who knows what will come up?" he said.

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