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A monthly newsletter covering area schools

Giving Back: Kennedy School program preps youth for future

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For more than a decade, the Kennedy Conservation Corps (KCC) at Al Kennedy High School (AKHS) has been putting students to work in capacities which prepare them for their transition into a post-graduation life.

Matt Hall is the school's transition specialist and crew leader for KCC.

"It's great resume material," said Hall. "It teaches them work ethic and they learn perseverance."

Moving teens from high school into the workforce or college is a key goal of the program and is accomplished with a wide variety of learning opportunities at its disposal.

Since its inception, the program has grown to include a summer work crew and even reimbursement to students for work hours.

At its peak, the KCC had three crews doing projects for the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the local watershed council.

Hall also oversees the school's garden, which grows plants for Lane County and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The nurseries house plants which are transported to work sites which the Army Corp of Engineers uses to bring back native prairie environments in the Dorena and Fern Ridge areas. The new school year may already be in full swing, but the KCC summer crew is 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.



Damien Sherwood/Cottage Grove Sentinel

The garden at Al Kennedy High School produces plants and vegetables which are shared with the community and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

"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.

See **GARDEN 4C**

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