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AmeriCorps workers pitch in to help Camden

By *DEBORAH HIRSCH*
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Two AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps workers wrestled with a battery-drained drill as they attempted to fix a railing at the Children's Garden in downtown Camden earlier this week.

Behind them, another group of young men and women prepared to install a stone pathway in front of a gazebo.

Camden residents will see many more people wearing the organization's signature green and white polo shirts before the end of the year. At any given time, up to 20 AmeriCorps members will start community gardens, read to schoolchildren, plant trees and renovate buildings around the city.

The program isn't new to the city. National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC) teams came to Camden in 2003 and 2004 to help Rutgers University with a health program. But the city never had so many teams until last year.

At that time, the NCCC had designated Camden as one of a handful of priority cities. A former AmeriCorps representative happened to read about the Children's Garden in an article about the Philadelphia Flower Show and encouraged her agency to call them.

The city might have missed out on hundreds of hours of manpower if that exchange never happened, said Children's Garden Director Mike Devlin, who also heads the Camden City Garden Club.

"These folks come in and they've got lots of energy and enthusiasm," Devlin said. "They see things from a fresh perspective. For those of us who are here day in, day out in Camden, it's just really refreshing."

Last spring, the teams stayed in a camp in Williamstown and commuted to Camden to clean up parks, survey trees for the NJ Tree Foundation and convert a Waterfront South church into the Camden Shipyard and Maritime Museum.

If not for their hard work, the museum would be way behind schedule because there was no money to pay for labor, said director Michael Lang, a former urban studies professor at Rutgers.

"To see what they've done, it really just takes my breath away," he said.

This year, the first NCCC teams arrived in March. Devlin and his wife, Valerie Frick, house one group at a home in Fairview. Another stays in a former rectory at the Maritime Museum.

Much of their time is devoted to fixing up the Children's Garden and plotting community gardens. The Garden also loans them out to other nonprofit groups. They've helped with everything from landscaping at the Boys and Girls Club to painting at a Volunteers of America building used for supportive housing.

The members also find projects on their own to complete independent service hours.

"This is my college course in life," said Joareyn Hill, 21, a team leader from Menominee Falls, Wis.

Although NCCC members provide free labor to Camden organizations, they're not technically volunteers. They receive health insurance and housing through AmeriCorps as well as a nominal biweekly stipend.

The teams spend six to eight weeks in one city before rotating to another. After completing the 10-month program, they receive \$4,725 for education.

"It's something productive, giving back while figuring out what to do next," in life, said Noel DiDomenico, 23, of Danbury, Conn.

For former AmeriCorps team leader Jesse Loubet, 25, the program was a chance to try something "uncharted" after realizing that cooking in a restaurant wasn't what he wanted to do with his culinary arts degree.

The Northeast Pennsylvania native made an impression during his rotation at the Children's Garden last year. When the organization received a grant to expand community gardening in Camden, Devlin hired Loubet to coordinate the effort.

So far this year, he and AmeriCorps workers have helped start 26 community gardens. Loubet also writes about healthy eating for the garden club newsletter.

"I didn't even know how to garden until I got here," he said, grinning.

Even though the members only spend a short time in the city, Devlin said the work they do makes an impact. On Friday, he honored AmeriCorps with one of the garden's annual "Champion of Children" Awards. AmeriCorps has also recognized Devlin's organization for its dedication to the program, last year naming the garden the sponsor of the year.

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Additional Facts

MORE INFORMATION

Children's Garden staff members are looking for nonprofit and government agencies in Camden that could use help from AmeriCorps members this summer. Contact (856) 365-8733. For more information about the AmeriCorps programs, including the National Civilian Community Corps, go to www.americorps.gov.



AVI STEINHARDT/Courier-Post

AmeriCorps worker Joareyn Hill, 21, of Menominee Falls, Wis., uses a circular saw as she works on a fence railing at the Camden Children's Garden. AmeriCorps workers are helping with a variety of projects in the city.



AVI STEINHARDT/Courier-Post

AmeriCorps workers Ned Scavuzzo-Duggan (front) and Joareyn Hill work on a path for a gazebo at the Camden Children's Garden.



Avi Steinhardt/Courier-Post
6/10/09 -- Americorps volunteer Noel DiDomenico (right, front) chisels out a notch in a fence railing with the help of fellow volunteers team leader Joareyn Hill, (left, back) and Sadie Stone at the Camden Children's Garden.



Avi Steinhardt/Courier-Post
6/10/09 -- Americorps volunteers Sadie Stone (left) and Noel DiDomenico replace a fence railing at the Camden Children's Garden.