

Discovering the Leader Within

By Katie Colasacco—Crew Member, Vermont Youth Conservation Corps Female Leadership Development Crew

We didn't have a thermometer, but we didn't need one to know it was the hottest day in weeks. The sun began to beat down as we trekked up Bald Mountain in Aitken State Forest, a state park outside of Rutland, Vermont. My legs ached from weeks of working on hiking trails and my feet felt heavy as I focused on putting one foot in front of the other. When we took a water break, I noticed my friend Ana glance at her watch. "We made it up yesterday in 40 Minutes," she said through gulps of water. "Think we can make it up in 37 today?"

The Vermont Youth Conservation Corps Female Leadership Development Crew (FLDC) gives young women age 18 and older the opportunity to live and work in a supportive and challenging environment over the summer. I had the privilege of being a member of the 2010 crew for nine weeks of camping outdoors, maintaining hiking trails, building wooden bridges, and participating in workshops geared toward building leadership skills. We were a crew of eight women—six corps members and two crew leaders—from a variety of backgrounds. We thrived on our similarities, we grew from our differences, and we came together to form a tight-knit family by summer's end.

The benefits of all-women's spaces are innumerable, particularly in traditionally male-dominated fields like conservation. When men are present it's sometimes easy to let them do the work that is traditionally seen as "masculine"—

whether that be heavy lifting, working with tools, or stepping into leadership roles.

Through a generous grant, The Vermont Women's Fund provided a space for the young women of the FLDC to learn and teach each other without a gendered power dynamic. There was no hesitation when reaching for a new tool. There was no

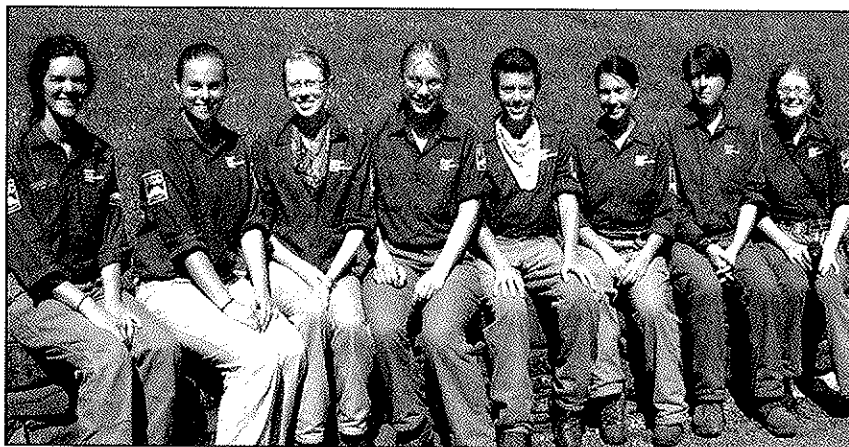
struggle to prove that a women could, in fact, carry loads of lumber out to a worksite. In lieu of these, there were amazing feats of strength, cooperative team efforts, and six completed work projects.

The confidence and encouragement that permeated the group all summer made a positive difference in every crewmember's life. Over those nine weeks I

saw women who had never before worked on a construction project wielding hammers and power drills like it was second nature. Every crewmember participated in engaging discussions—some planned and some spontaneous—ranging from the chang-

ing roles of women in today's society to the advantages of eating organic and local food. We each had the opportunity to lead the crew for a period of one week, and we all learned what leadership tactics work best for each of us in different situations.

Programs like the Female Leadership Development Crew are some of the most important and valuable opportunities for young women in Vermont. They push us out of our comfort zones, yet still provide support systems that give us the encouragement to try new things with gusto. They give us the chance to learn women-specific leadership theory and skills, and offer us the space to become more confident, informed and well-rounded individuals. They make us choose to challenge ourselves and discover our full capabilities. They make us hike up mountains in heat waves only to make us want to hike faster.



Summer 2010 Female Leadership Development Crew (Katie fourth from rt)

These days my hiking boots sit in my closet while I rely on sneakers to get me across my college campus. A desk is now my seat instead of the forest floor, but I know I learned just as much in the woods as I do in the classroom. With my backpack weighted down with books I walk a little taller than I used to, boosted by the

knowledge that I can do anything I set my mind to, and that we women are filled with incredible strength that is just waiting to be discovered.

The Vermont Youth Conservation Corps received a \$5,500 grant from the Women's Fund in 2010 to support the FLDC. For more information on this program contact the Corps at (802) 434-3985.