

Vision-impaired youths in earth-friendly apprenticeships

By Joel Banner Baird
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Seeing is not the only way of believing, they said.

On Wednesday, five sight-impaired teenagers in the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps sweated in the great outdoors. They'd been cleaning up around the lean-tos in the woods behind the West Monitor Barn, east of Richmond.

"There are some disadvantages to not seeing well," said Becca Camp-Allen, 19, of Richmond. "You can't see bugs from far off, and then all the sudden they're in your face."

Thursday, Camp-Allen and her colleagues returned to their urban day jobs, earning \$270 a week. Their vision for the future, it turns out, matched that of Burlington's ReCycle North.

The students spearhead the conservation corps' four-week Learn, Earn and Prosper (LEAP) program, a statewide effort that edges corps members closer to self-sufficiency. A job with ReCycle North exposes people to the business end of environmental stewardship.

For Aaron Senese, 18, of Shaftsbury, it brought dreams of computer programming within reach. "This job was the dorkiest," he said, "so it was right up my alley."

Hunched over the gutted chassis of a computer tower, Senese scanned the micro-landscape with his face inches from the motherboard.

"Some of this is ridiculously out of date," he said. "I'm looking to see what we can salvage."

As it turns out, most of it can be and will be detached, sorted, and sold as scrap or plugged into an entry-level resale rig.

"This is an important part of recycling," said Tim Feerer, Senese's supervisor. "You develop a sense of what sells."

This computer's antique tape drive had an uncertain future. Ethernet cables, some of which Senese reassembled and tested, are sure-fire sales for the incoming crop of college students, Feerer said.

Senese's career path will take him through computer studies in college. ReCycle North is a part of that trajectory.

"All these skills will come in handy," he said. "This will help me understand the bare bones, where things come from."

"Sometimes I have to slow down and look real carefully to see if a screw is a slotted head, a Phillips head or a Torx," he added. "But eyeballing something -- appraising things just visually -- it gets pretty abstract. I'm interested in having more intimacy with what I'm working on. I like to work in different dimensions and I try not to get too detached from my work."

In the ReCycle North building materials lot, on the other side of Pine Street, Dustin Atkins, 18, of Winooski fielded a non-stop stream of business calls on a mobile handset. Atkins can read text in a 72-point font only, yet he strode among the stacks of lumber and paving stones as if he owned the place.

When he came inside he kept his sunglasses on.

"I load, unload; I work the (Braille-equipped) register and I answer the phones," Atkins said. "I do everything but drive the fork lift."

He checked out one of the last customers of the day.

"I want to have my own business eventually," he said. "I want to own a corner store in Vermont. In Winooski."

Other corps workers explored the inner workings of society's cast-offs. Kemal Cross, 16, of Calais disassembled a sewing machine. Brett Hess, 16, of Hyde Park, helped gut, clean and retrofit a gas stove (his supervisor, Chuck Hall, is industry-certified).

Thomas Hark, who founded Vermont Youth Conservation Corps in 1985 -- and who remains its president -- said Vermont's relatively small community of sight-impaired people made it an ideal proving ground for work-based learning.

"As this develops here, it'll be much easier to roll it out in other states; there's a huge interest in this program at the national level," he said. "These kids are absolute trailblazers. They're going to have an impact for years to come."

Kate Villa, the director of development, said the group planned to introduce even greater diversity into youth teams.

"We see benefits to at-risk kids working alongside college-bound kids; urban kids with rural kids; blind kids with sighted kids. They tend to share skill sets, from how to use power tools to just showing up for work on time."

Villa said that exposure to a wealth of job possibilities -- and to people who can coach youthful ambition -- would gradually enrich the greater community. She sounded excited.

At ReCycle North's billing office, Camp-Allen stuffed and stamped envelopes. She looked up, her eyes on an invisible horizon.

"It's not like I want to do this kind of job all my life," she said. "Some of the tasks are long and tedious. I really want to be a history teacher; it's been one of my favorite subjects ever since I was young."

Her preference for students? High school or college.

"Middle school? Never," she said. "My time in middle school was absolutely horrible. I got teased a lot. No amount of money could make me want to relive those years."

She continued to talk about teaching as she worked. In another part of the building, Senese gazed at his in-box: an array of three intact but unwanted computers. He got to work; he was on the clock.

"Most people have a career waiting for them," he said. "Everyone has something that they're almost made for."

Contact Joel Banner Baird at 660-1843 or joelbaird@bfp.burlingtonfreepress.com Conservation Corps The nonprofit Vermont Youth Conservation Corps is modeled in part after the federally administered Great Depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps. The young men of the CCC planted millions of trees, built state parks, dams and cross-country trails at a time when Americans desperately needed jobs.

Unlike the monumental federal program, the VYCC is co-ed and operates in collaboration with a wide variety of public and private organizations.

Each year, about 300 young men and women aged 16-24 work on VYCC-brokered jobs in Vermont communities, farms, parks and wilderness. On the Web Vermont Youth Conservation Corps: www.vycc.org

Civilian Conservation Corps: www.cccalumni.org

ReCycle North: www.ReCycleNorth.org No strikes "If you're late three times or if you don't do the dishes, you're fired. If you smell like smoke, you're fired. I don't care if you're blind. These kids aren't afraid of high standards. Once you know what the strike zone is, there are no strikes. It's the adults who impose limits on them. "

-- Thomas Hark, founding (and current) president of Vermont Youth Conservation Corps