



VERMONT
YOUTH
CONSERVATION
CORPS

2023

GRATITUDE REPORT





INTRODUCTION

For many years, VYCC's tagline has been "Today's Youth, Tomorrow's Leaders."

While this remains true, "Today's Youth, **Today's** Leaders" is even more apt.

VYCC participants are leading now. They are doing seriously hard work, together, in challenging conditions. In addition to the projects they complete, VYCC crews build community and care for land and neighbors.

In this report, you will hear directly from 2023 participants about their leadership and a multitude of other skills they have developed. We are excited for you to read about the work VYCC crews completed in 2023, all of which increase resilience across Vermont. We hope you will follow the QR codes to our website for more in-depth content.

Special thanks to Ian, Storm, Petra, Claire, Dan, Allissa, Jenn and Dave, who were so generous to partner with us on creating this report. We know you will enjoy their perspectives!

We also thank the land as an ever-present and active participant in our learning, work, growth, rest, and nourishment.

Thank you for your support in creating opportunities for young people to take action, gain skills, and connect with the natural world.

YEAR AT A GLANCE

178 MEMBERS & LEADERS



Completed **57,152**
hrs of service



Earned **~\$1M** through
paid service and
learning



Completed **310**
college credits
through educational
partnerships
Received **135**
professional
certifications
(up **45%** from 2022!)

CONSERVATION – 16 CREWS



WATER QUALITY

Removed **52,000**
water chestnut
rosettes

4,400 native
plantings



TRAILS

Built/repaired
7.4 miles of trail



FOREST HEALTH

Maintained/restored
70 acres



BUILD

Repaired/built
45 structures

FOOD & FARM – 8 CREWS



Grew **67,231 lbs** of fresh
organic food



Supplied **420** households
managing food insecurity
with weekly food shares



Worked with **12**
community partners

NOTABLE MILESTONES:



Phase One of the East Monitor Barn's restoration is complete. We lifted a 500,000 pound structure and then safely put it back down on a new foundation!

www.eastmonitorbarn.org

1.0



The third annual Harvest Dinner in October sold out – thank you to the 120 people who joined us.

3.0



VYCC is among four partners continuing to develop the Serve Learn Earn collaborative to increase workforce development opportunities for Vermonters. Collectively, we have delivered 7,500 weeks of service and training; and \$2.75M in participants wages/stipends.

www.servelearnearn.org

4.0



Nine local businesses
sponsored the Food &
Farm Program.

[www.vycc.org/support/
corporate-sponsorship](http://www.vycc.org/support/corporate-sponsorship)

9.0

17 years of combined service
on the board – Thank you
Jim Feinson and Ben Eastman
for exemplary and generous
leadership.

www.vycc.org/board-members

17.0

150 Volunteers helped out on
the Farm as individuals and as
groups from schools and local
businesses. Thank you!

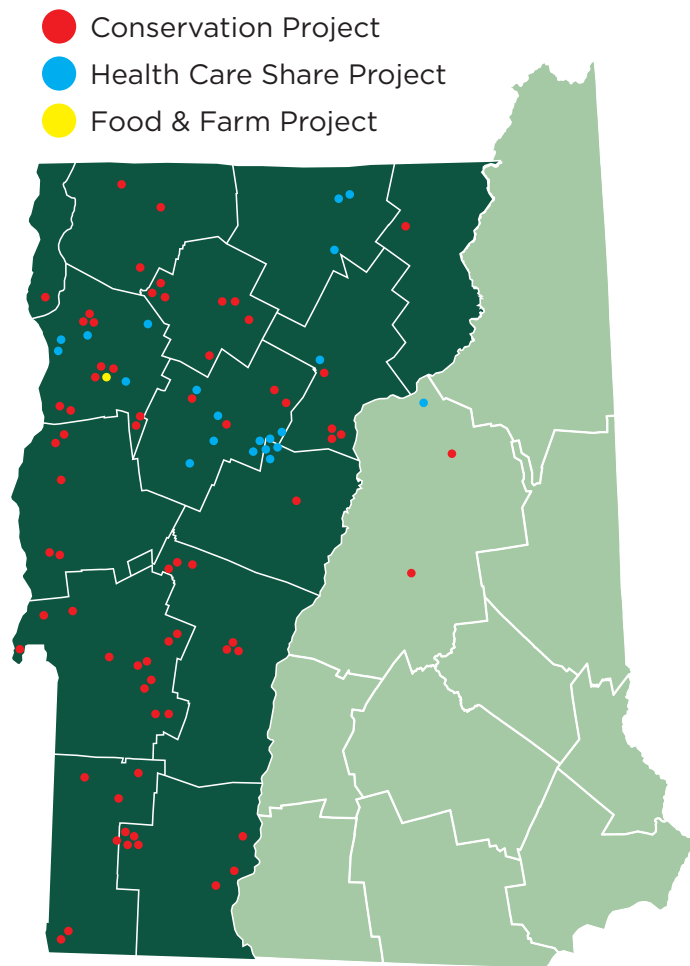
150

BUILDING RESILIENCE

The ability of people and land to bounce back from challenges – **resilience** – was a clear and consistent theme of 2023. VYCC crews endured many challenges – wildfire smoke, floods and heavy rains, elevated heat indexes – to complete important conservation projects and improve the resilience of Vermont's natural and working lands.

WITHSTANDING STORMS: TRAIL STRUCTURES BUILT TO LAST

Two crews returned to the Burrows Trail on Camel's Hump to continue the trail's three-year overhaul. Overuse of this popular trail has increased impact on the ecosystem and caused excess erosion. Following rigging and rock-setting training, the Pro Trails crew ran a highline to build three stone staircases about 1.6 miles up the trail. A second crew joined in to build check steps and a waterbar. These structures were tested during July's heavy rains and flooding, demonstrating their importance in directing the flow of water during severe weather events.





A **“turnpike”** is a trail structure that elevates the trail surface above wet ground. Typically, lumber or logs along the sides serve as a container for gravel or earth.

ENGAGING STUDENTS IN SUSTAINABLE TRAIL BUILDING

In September, our first-ever day crew for young adults rebuilt a rotted turnpike, repaired surrounding drainage structures, and replaced old steps on Mount Philo’s House Rock Trail in Charlotte. These structures will reduce erosion and protect the surrounding plants and soils from human impact. Running this crew in the fall allowed student volunteers from Winooski High School and participants of ReSOURCE’s YouthBuild Program to gain skills and get excited about sustainable trail building.

PROTECTING BIRD BREEDING HABITAT IN THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE

Forest Health Crews felled trees, removed invasive plants, and planted native trees and shrubs in 19 locations. These efforts make Vermont’s forests more resilient to climate change and improve wildlife habitat. Did you know that Vermont’s forests, valleys, and waterways provide critical habitat for over 300 (!) species of migratory birds that fly as far south as Argentina?

RESTORING SHORELINE FORESTS

Forest Health Crews' work is helping restore Vermont's clayplain forest by planting native tree species. This type of forest, characterized by mineral rich clay soil, once ran along Lake Champlain. They are now a rare natural community after heavy logging and farming. Conservation groups are working to restore original valley clayplain forests.

LETTING WETLANDS BE WETLANDS

A valuable forested wetland in Cambridge was being drained by several culverts that crossed a carriage trail. Crews dug these out by hand (extremely heavy!) and replaced them with gravel fords to slow the flow of water. The result: the wetland is storing

more water, and the new fords are preventing excessive flood damage downstream in the Brewster River.

SLOWING THE FLOW OF WATER

Concerned landowners' calls for action on erosion and stormwater flow into the Mississquoi River led to a VYCC crew's work: building a terraced rain garden, planting hundreds of trees and live stakes, and constructing check dams in the gullies. Projects like this restore wetlands to their natural functions that protect land and communities downstream.

You can make a difference:
Report concerns about erosion to your local Resources Conservation District.



The Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation has developed software modeling to estimate how many pounds of phosphorus a project has prevented from entering surface water. VYCC will have an opportunity to run our projects through this software. Thank you, DEC, for this important work!

RESPONDING TO SEVERE WEATHER ON THE FARM

VYCC is grateful that most of our production fields are upland enough from the Winooski River to have avoided major flooding. VYCC crews grew and harvested 67,000 pounds of food – just 3,000 pounds fewer than 2022.

Despite our upland location, the fields at VYCC were fully saturated in July, threatening crops – especially root vegetables. Camping crews returned to VYCC as the rains approached to be safe and on high ground. While they waited for roads to reopen, Conservation and Farm Crew Members teamed up to harvest garlic before it was lost. They also harvested beans, washed cabbage, worked with chickens, and packed Health Care Shares.

Did you know? Garlic is a 9-month crop, which means you cannot grow another succession in the same season if something goes awry. At the time of flooding, we were fortunate that our garlic was just ready to harvest! Health Care Share recipients have consistently requested more garlic in their shares, and we are so glad we were able to deliver this favorite to our community.



Farm crews then delivered 390 Health Care Shares on July 13 by creatively routing around multiple road closures and resumed full delivery on July 20.

FARMING IN A CHANGING CLIMATE

Food & Farm Program staff are attuned to changing weather patterns and strategies to improve the farm's resilience to periods of saturating rain and drought. Our sloped farm is experiencing increased erosion during heavy rain events, especially on freshly formed beds where the soil has been significantly disturbed by tilling the soil with the tractor.

This spring, the team is transitioning some fields from a tractor-based row cropping system to a human-scale, intensive market-gardening approach. New beds will be 100 feet long and 30 inches wide. Beds shaped this spring will be managed primarily with hand-labor.

Drawing from published research and other farms' experience, we anticipate the new beds will result in reduced erosion, reduced use of diesel fuel, increased soil health, and an improved participant experience.



PAID SERVICE PROVIDES OPPORTUNITIES TO **DEVELOP DURABLE AND TECHNICAL SKILLS.**

People join conservation corps to make a difference, to take action and put muscle into an issue they care about. They show up with a lot of heart, a bit of trepidation, and – quite often – little to no experience with the projects they undertake. As a group, they start out as total strangers to each other.

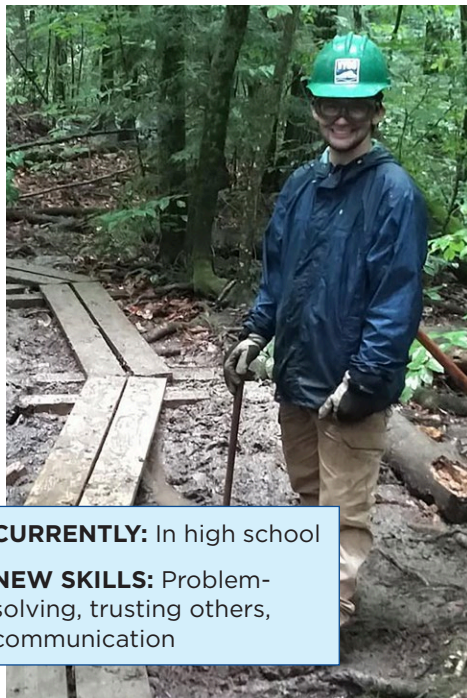
A mere week or two later, Corps Members are using tools with confidence; teaching others skills they have just learned; looking out for one another; cooking meals in a backcountry or commercial kitchen; and celebrating hard-earned accomplishments.

The work is challenging in many ways. A combination of challenge, support, and work with meaning results in Corps Members gaining a multitude of skills.



Ian Ritter, a student at Mount Mansfield Union High School, completed a conservation crew in 2022 and returned in 2023. He reflects on the benefits of working as a group to complete projects:

“One surprise - I thought the adults were going to say ‘Okay, here’s what you have to do. You can only work this way. This is the only right way.’ But when it comes to working on a project, there isn’t just one right way about it. There are many ways to do it. Maybe some are better than others. They all have successes and disadvantages. Like, you could go for a strategy that makes a project faster but more risky or less detailed. Or, if you really want to finish every last detail, you can take more time to complete the project.



CURRENTLY: In high school

NEW SKILLS: Problem-solving, trusting others, communication

“The way I think projects should work is that everyone gets together and discusses, ‘What needs to get done?’

How will it get done?’ There are a lot of things to think about.”

Ian also shares his experience as a person with autism:

“Before VYCC I was so isolated. There weren’t many words I knew, and I couldn’t explain myself very well. VYCC gives me a great opportunity to connect with others. I feel like I can just safely drop my figurative mask of being ‘normal’ and be who I want to be. Not enough people understand that every single person in this world is different. I’m glad that VYCC embraces that.

“When I think more deeply about people understanding each other, it makes me want to go into psychology. I want to understand more about how different groups of people think.”



CURRENTLY: In college

NEW SKILLS:

Delegation, managing morale, growing food, cooking

Storm Rushford is an environmental science major anticipating graduating from the University of Vermont this spring. He joined a Food & Farm crew to gain outdoor work experience – and he did! Here is a reflection from Storm:

“I’m looking for jobs right now. Employers ask if you have experience working outside in all conditions. I can definitely say that

I do! At VYCC, we worked outside in every condition. It was fun, and it’s great to have that experience.

“Employers also ask for leadership experience, which is tough to get as a 20-or-21-year-old student. Having been the Peer Leader of the Week gave me that leadership experience. Delegation was an important skill I acquired. It’s tempting to try and complete the tasks yourself, especially if you already know how to do it and feel confident, but being able to delegate is a difficult skill. I’m not amazing at it, but I developed it and learned techniques that work.

“Another interpersonal skill is managing general morale. In work settings, spending 40 hours a week with the same people with all the highs and lows, being able to manage the lows and rebound up to neutral or positive

is a good skill to develop. It’s something that I can use at future jobs. I found that I could be helpful in that way both as a Leader and a Crew Member.

“I developed a wide base of understanding on organic farming. Since we were part of every step along the way from seeding, transplanting, weeding and harvesting, I now have a solid knowledge base on how to grow a wide variety of crops.

“Spending time in the kitchen was so cool. VYCC got me more interested in food and food systems. One day we had a bunch of baby carrots, and I decided to make pesto out of the carrot tops. I’ve also been making hummus, salad dressings and baking sourdough bread. It’s been a cool progression. Since VYCC, I’ve been able to build confidence as a cook.”

CURRENTLY: Teaching

NEW SKILLS: Felling trees, running chainsaws, reliability, taking initiative



Petra Castaneda completed the 2023 Pro Forest Crew, then took a teaching position at a Montessori school in Vermont. She is going to Belgium for a month this summer to gain skills in horticulture toward her ultimate career goal: childhood horticultural therapy.

"I came into VYCC having never picked up a chainsaw before. I didn't expect to learn so fast or get so comfortable so quickly; but with the hours we spent sawing, it became second nature after a while. It's an opportunity to not just be outdoors, but to have some influence over it.

"I discovered a lot of passion for conservation and chainsaw work. So, I feel torn because I want to start my career in childhood horticultural therapy, but I also found something at VYCC that I care about very, very much. Leaving VYCC, I got homesick for it. I still miss chainsaw work.

"VYCC gave me more confidence. I learned a lot about my own limits and how much I can do, how I can stay calm under pressure. My Crew Leader told me a few times that she really appreciated that she could trust me when she had to step away. I took the initiative to make the crew more efficient and was always thinking about our timeframe. Long story short, I learned how to take initiative and how to be reliable."

CREW LEADER TRAINING **SETS THE STAGE FOR GROWTH**

Conservation and Food & Farm Leaders arrive with skills and passion. Their energy, expertise, and leadership facilitate VYCC's growth as an organization. Check out Leaders' bios on our website to read about their orientation to community, conservation science, food justice, sustainability, education, service, and the power of levity, fun, exploration, and unique hobbies.

As Leaders arrive, three weeks of training complements their incoming knowledge and skills. Training is followed by a full season of facilitating this learning for their Crew Members.

VYCC's Leader training, delivered by our professional staff, covers six comprehensive courses recognized by the Community College of Vermont (CCV). The combination of training and field experience across the season corresponds



to 12 college-level credits for each Leader. Woven throughout training are, of course, technical aspects of tool use and project skills specific to carpentry, farming and trail building.

Leaders complete projects during training where they practice everything from personal safety to tool maintenance. Several components of training are consistent across programs. These include Risk Assessment and Safety Management, Driver Training, Building Inclusive Communities, Wellness and Resiliency, Feedback Techniques, Conflict Resolution, Harassment Prevention, First Aid, and CPR.

These hard-won technical and interpersonal skills, combined with a commitment to serving communities and the environment, are central to VYCC's program.



CURRENTLY: VYCC staff member

NEW SKILLS:

Group facilitation, time management, tool maintenance, circular saw

Claire Scherf arrived as a Food & Farm Leader with prior experience on farms. She knew of VYCC as a place that offers a lot of positions to people seeking a first job in agriculture.

Claire reflects on what she learned as a Leader in 2023 and what she is doing now:

“I learned a lot about group facilitation. I learned to distill my knowledge and experience and see how it trickles to someone who is just starting out.

“I learned about every tool on the farm. On other farms I’ve worked on, you have your niche - your skillset - and you stick to that. There’s not a lot of time to play around and try something new. In the spring at VYCC, we cleaned all the tools. It’s really valuable to know how to clean all your tools. I found that gave me ownership the whole season.

“In building chicken coops, we got trained to use circular saws and drills. I’d used hand tools here and there but never start-to-finish on a project by myself.

“I knew my Crew Leader season was my last farmhand season. That was the goal I had in mind and I knew that I wanted to step into a full-time role.”

VYCC had an opening for a Food & Farm Production Coordinator; Claire applied and moved into that role over the winter. She is now responsible for hand tool maintenance, and for our laying hens and broiler birds.

Several Leaders from her cohort are also working on farms and gaining more production experience. “VYCC gives a cool jumping off point of something you might not have been exposed to. Being a Crew Leader had its challenges, but learning to integrate into a totally different community and system and hold yourself in a large group is really valuable.”

The staff team is committed to helping alumni with their goals post-VYCC. Assistance includes guidance in creating resumes and making direct introductions to employers and schools. Claire captures the value of this, particularly for Food & Farm Program participants:

“Farmers are busy and it’s rare to find someone who can support you in the way that VYCC can. I think it’s really awesome knowing that there’s support and resources.”

PARTNERSHIPS OFFER **PATHWAYS AND PROGRESSION**

As Corps Members complete projects, they build relationships with professionals in the field and get to know local employers in conservation, natural resources management, sustainable agriculture, food systems and more.

VYCC alumni are employed with partners including Burlington Parks and Recreation, Green Mountain Club, Intervale, ReSOURCE, The Nature Conservancy, US Forest Service, Vermont Foodbank, Vermont Huts Association, and Vermont Works for Women. Other alumni are working locally in education, and the for-profit sector in construction, renewable energy, outdoor recreation and agriculture.

As a University of Vermont student working for ReSOURCE in the summer of 2004, **Dan Lee** commuted to Stowe to deconstruct buildings as part of the Spruce Peak redevelopment. The newly-restored West Monitor Barn always caught his eye as he passed by on I-89: "I remember seeing that frame and thinking it looked pretty cool."

After graduating, Dan had an internship on the west coast. When the internship ended, "I was hitting dead ends with finding employment and decided that heading back to Vermont would be a good idea. I applied and joined VYCC."

In 2008, Dan helped stabilize a portion of the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail, then became a Crew Leader and Park Ranger at Quechee State Park. Having caught the service bug, Dan came back to serve a second year as an AmeriCorps member - this time as Park Educator in Moosalamoo National Recreation area in Goshen.

"This period of time cemented my appreciation and understanding of the community values and hard work that make Vermont the special place that it is. Last summer, I was fortunate to return to VYCC as they began restoration of the East Monitor Barn."

On the enormity of the East Monitor Barn project and his role, Dan said: "Some people will stop by and say, 'oh, such a big project! The scale is so big.' And it doesn't feel like that for me. I get it, it's a big



barn, there's a lot of components, but it doesn't feel like that. And I think it doesn't feel like that because I feel very comfortable on this site. I think that is

because of my experience working for the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps and how that experience made me feel."

VYCC BRINGS YOUNG ADULTS TO VERMONT.



The need to attract and retain young adults to Vermont is not new. Sobering trends are well documented: if every unemployed person in Vermont found a job, there would still be 12,600 jobs unfilled; and pre-K to 12th grade enrollment has dropped by 20% from 2004 to 2021 (VT Futures Project).

VYCC is an entry point for young adults from other states. We are able to offer paid work with (limited) accommodations. Once here, Members forge connections with people and place. They begin to build a professional network through project sponsors and partners, and a social network through the VYCC community. This is a cohort of young adults who value community and want to steward our natural resources.

Some examples of Members connecting with Vermont through VYCC:

Petra's path led from Arizona to a VYCC Forest Health Crew; she is in Vermont today working as an early childhood educator.

Philip arrived from New Orleans as a Timber Framers Guild volunteer (we hosted a group of volunteers for a week to help with the East Monitor Barn). From there, Phillip joined a VYCC trails crew and is now a carpenter's apprentice in Burlington.

Allissa reached the maximum number of AmeriCorps service terms by serving across the country. She came to Vermont from Arizona to lead a VYCC crew and is now working with Capstone

Community Action in Barre as the Disaster Recovery Case Manager Supervisor.

Allissa's reflection on becoming a Crew Leader:

"I used to think that becoming an adult meant exploring independence and autonomy. Through years of service experiences, my question has changed to 'What kind of impact can I have, and what can we accomplish together?'"



"Becoming an invested community member allowed me to expand my vision of myself, what I am capable of, and the ways I can contribute.

"I chose to become a VYCC Crew Leader... to connect with young individuals who have taken a chance. To create a safe space for them to explore their own potential and capabilities – to discover what they could accomplish if they allow themselves to try."

Jenn Greig has spent the past eight years working, learning, and serving across the country. 2024 will be her second season in Vermont.

"My first corps experience was in 2015 with NCCC AmeriCorps. It was an alternative to going to work or school. It was great to learn technical, practical skills and see what type of jobs are available. I loved the culture of people coming together from different backgrounds, exploring new places and problem-solving. Starting out, you don't know how things work. You figure it out together. That's helped me with life outside the Corps.

"I loved the idea of being able to camp and live in different cities. In Arizona, Colorado, North Carolina,



Vermont – I was doing service experiences, school and work. I got my architecture degree. When I graduated, I jumped into carpentry.

“I grew up outside the U.S. I moved here when I was 15. It was a big adjustment – the language and the culture. I didn’t really feel like I lived here until my corps experiences. I felt at home in this country by

getting to know all these places. It changed everything for me. I feel at home in the U.S. now. It’s had a big impact.”

Jenn’s 2023 crew started out constructing the screened-in porch at the Grout Pond Hut. She then led her crew in building a privy (moldering toilet) in Stratton and a staircase in Cambridge. On break week and after the crew wrapped up, Jenn jumped in on the East Monitor Barn restoration.

“That project was familiar – closer to what I had been doing before I joined VYCC – a high level of precision. The privy was also familiar, but it wasn’t just me building. It was me building with six other people. We all needed to find a role with that.

“The connection I had with the East Monitor Barn and the

Timber Framers Guild - that sharing of knowledge - I’m very excited to move more towards construction and rebuilding as part of preservation work. I think about that a lot.

“I loved all the projects that we did last year, and I’m excited now to come back and work on the pole barn project. That’s what sparked my interest to stay in Vermont.”

VYCC alumni add so much to Vermont life! And, we can do more. Housing is the biggest limiting factor, and if you would like to learn more about our plans to increase housing and more effectively support Members and Leaders, please reach out to one of our Executive Directors, Leah Mital and Breck Knauff.

THE IMPACT OF VYCC **LASTS A LIFETIME**

IN MEMORIAM: ATHENA KALANDROS

In 1994, Athena Kalandros and Dave Hakes worked for VYCC. In September of that year, they got married.

Athena passed away in 2023 and Dave has offered these reflections on VYCC and the path their VYCC experiences led them toward:

“I’ll never forget our decision to apply to VYCC. We had recently moved to Vermont after bouncing around the country doing a variety of work that kept us engaged with the outdoors - ski bums in the Sierras, Rockies and Adirondacks; Assistant Forest Ranger, Wilderness Guide, camp counselor and backcountry trip leader - whatever we could do to see the world and be outdoors.



Athena in the
1990's, Vermont

“We got engaged in the fall of 1993 and decided maybe we should get “real” jobs and plan for our future. She had a desk job at UVM, and I was driving a Pepsi delivery truck out of South Burlington. One evening, I was perusing the classifieds and came across a VYCC ad looking for park managers. I pointed it out to Athena, and her excitement was instantaneous. She had already seen it, but didn’t bring it up because of our thoughts on a “real” job. Turns out, we both agreed that the “real” jobs weren’t real to us.

“We got married after the park closed, and several members of our crew attended our ceremony

in the Adirondacks. In 1995, I managed Smugglers Notch State Park for VYCC, and Athena managed the Vermont State Ski Dorm in Stowe for several years, running two trail crews out of the ski dorm in the summer, and as a traditional hostel for skiers in the winter. She had a hand in building a bridge there.

“Our time with VYCC was probably the most formative time of our lives together. Athena continued to work and volunteer for numerous organizations over the next decades, speaking often of her time with the Youth Corps and using the lessons learned there to assist other organizations in attaining their goals.

“The highlight of our time was hosting over 2,400 Deadheads at Lake Carmi when the Grateful Dead played Highgate in 1994. The Dead came again in 1995, and all the parks in the area of Highgate used our successful model from the prior year to host thousands of concert-goers. It was a great time!

“Athena directed the teen pregnancy prevention program at the Lund Family Center in Burlington, then worked as the Director of the Volunteer Center at San Juan College in Farmington, NM. She inherited a program with

one director and one part time employee and a \$50,000 annual budget. Within a year and a half, she had increased the budget to over \$1 million, a full-time staff of 10+, and established AmeriCorps and SeniorCorps crews. She credited her VYCC experience with her success.

“Thank you to VYCC for the positive experiences you gave us both that have guided our lives since then. Your mission holds true to our values and is a huge benefit to the youth of Vermont, as well as the State of Vermont and all those that benefit, directly or indirectly, from the great work VYCC does.”



Dave and his daughters attended our Harvest Dinner in the fall, and visited old project sites: “That bridge at the Ski Dorm? It’s still there. It looks like the foot bridge has been modified since 1995, but the cribbing support looks like what Athena and her crew originally built.”

The team at VYCC extends heartfelt thanks to Corps Members, and to our incredible community of supporters. Thank you for making our programs possible.

Visit www.vycc.org/news to see this report with a list of 2023 supporters.

Financial reports are available on Candid (formerly Guidestar).

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You can dedicate a portion of your retirement assets or life insurance policy to VYCC without incurring estate taxes.

GET YOUR GIFT MATCHED

Employers (or former employer if you're retired) often match gifts you make. If they do, there's usually a simple form they provide.

AVOID CAPITAL GAINS TAX

Donate appreciated stock. You don't have to pay capital gains tax, and neither do we!

SPREAD OUT YOUR ANNUAL GIFT

Sign up for monthly or quarterly gifts on our website. Using a debit card minimizes transaction fees.

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A

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