

Educating the community

AmeriCorps members contribute to water conservation

Educating communities about water conservation has been a hot topic during recent times of drought and low water levels. One group of volunteers in El Paso, Texas, is making sure they play a part in educating residents on conserving water for the future.

The Upper Rio Grande Water Conservation Corps project provides water conservation and water quality education to homeowners, farmers, and youth. It is funded by AmeriCorps, a network of local, state, and national service programs. In 2006-2007 the project had 17 members, eight of whom are returning for a second year.

Dina Corral is one AmeriCorps member who started in the program in October 2006 and is currently working on her second year as a full-time member. "I joined because I have always enjoyed working with my community and outreach programs," she said. "And I love gardening, so I was lucky to be placed on the horticulture team."

The project has three water education programming focus areas: agriculture, community, and youth. The agriculture team works with farmers and local agricultural-related

programs. The community team is involved in horticulture, landscapes, sports fields, parks, pesticide-use safety, and in-home demonstrations and education. Youth team programs increase knowledge and skills in water, change behaviors associated with water conservation and quality, and support 4-H-based water curricula delivery in schools.

Corral and other AmeriCorps members have been working at the Texas AgriLife Extension Service xeriscape demonstration garden at the Texas AgriLife Research and Extension Center at El Paso, potting seedlings that are later donated to Habitat for Humanity homes. They also installed the irrigation and put in plants at three of these homes.

Last year, as part of "Make a Difference Day," AmeriCorps members cleaned a historic cemetery in Clint, Texas, that was overgrown and barely visible because of the weeds. Some residents from the area were not aware the cemetery was even there, Corral said.

"This year's 'Make a Difference Day' project was also very fulfilling," she said. "We did the landscaping for a 12-year-old girl who has leukemia and has always wanted a



Photos left to right: AmeriCorps members worked with the El Paso Habitat for Humanity. (L to R) Vanessa Melendez, Yesenia Perez, Dina Corral, Laura Herrera, Stephanie Madrid and Jessica Molina. AmeriCorps members leveling land at leukemia patient Georgina Gomez's home on Make a Difference Day 2007. (L to R) Liz Tabarani, Jessica Molina, Korina Navarro and Antonio Sanchez. Korina Navarro teaching a girl how to make a butterfly bookmarker. (Photos courtesy of Dina Corral.)

garden. We created a prayer garden, all made possible through donations from community partners. AmeriCorps members planted low water use plants and mostly native trees.”

Members also educated students from elementary through high schools on recycling and water conservation. As part of the Martin Luther King Can Drive, members collected more than 20 tons of food for area shelters around El Paso.

Daphne Richards, AmeriCorps project manager and El Paso County Extension agent-Horticulture, said, “The project has not only made a difference in the lives of our community residents, but also on the members themselves, who are learning valuable job skills.” In addition, the members learn about leadership, conflict resolution, problem solving, and other important life skills to become future leaders of their communities.

“I have learned many things from AmeriCorps,” Corral said, “but the most important is that people are willing to change their habits and become earth-friendly and aware that our natural resources need to be taken care of. The only problem is the lack of infor-

mation. But, once you give them the information, they do take it and use it wisely. So the main thing to learn is that the word needs to get out on water conservation.”

In the first year, the El Paso AmeriCorps members contributed 22,277 hours to the program. Thus far, more than 11,500 youth and homeowners have been contacted through water education, recycling, summer camp and in-school programs, and other special educational events. Agricultural producers have benefited from various AmeriCorps workshops and demonstrations, with more than 1,022 farmers being contacted between December 2006 and August 2007.

“We are looking forward to making a difference in even more people’s lives in the second year,” Richards said.

Corral said she could write a book about her experiences and everything the Upper Rio Grande Water Conservation Corps members have done.

“My time with AmeriCorps has been a phenomenal experience, and two years is not enough time to do all the projects I have in mind.” 



Photos left to right: As part of the community-based team, members test soil moisture on local sports fields. The 2006 community-based horticulture team at the Desert Poppies Festival Water Conservation Educational Booth: (top) Liz Tabarani, Jessica Molina, Claudia Vargas and Laura Herrera, (bottom) Dina Corral and Korina Navarro. Members participated in the 2007 Make a Difference Day program with exhibits and volunteer work. (Left photos courtesy of Dina Corral.)