

Through Their Own Eyes: Excerpts from Student Journals
Community Design Center of Minnesota 2008 summer youth programs

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The Community Design Center of Minnesota (CDC) organizes programs for children and youth to help them learn about good food, gardening and conservation in ways that also help build community. During 2008, the CDC sponsored two summer programs for teenagers in the Dayton's Bluff neighborhood: the Garden Corps and Conservation Corps youth internships. The Garden Corps manages seven vegetable, herb and flower gardens and sells their produce in two farmers' markets and through a CSA. In the off-season they use garden materials to make value added products: vinegars, wreaths and garden ornaments. The second program, the Conservation Corps, involves youth in helping develop and maintain the Bruce Vento Nature Sanctuary and Swede Hollow Park, designing and planting neighborhood parks and flowers planters, and installing more than thirty rain gardens to date. During the summer program, youth keep journals. Excerpts from these provide an account of the young people's experience through their own eyes.

Many of the young people in both programs have participated before and they are very clear about why they want to return for another season:

This summer I want to learn more than I did last year. I want to make this year even better and try new things that I didn't get to do last year. I want to focus more on the veggies and the skills to make them grow better. I want to learn more about each one we plant. If I learn more in depth about each plant it will help me make my own garden.
(Garden Corps)

I like working in the dirt and getting dirty. (Garden Corps)

It's not just about planting:

This year I have to be more of a leader because this is my second year at Community Design Center. I look forward to being a leader (if I can)...I am ready to take on whatever comes in my way in working and making the community a better place to live.
(Garden Corps)

I'm coming back because of all the people here. I have met and befriended many of my fellow workers and they, in turn, have helped me actually grow and change. Mature a bit if you like. I'm also back because the work that I do here is rewarding and fulfilling, not because of the awards or things that we've won, but because I am happy to be working each day and that is enough for me. (Conservation Corps)

What I really want to bring [to the Garden Corps] is togetherness. I want this so that everyone will feel like they belong somewhere. Whenever I go past the first garden I worked in I will remember all the good times I had with my friends.

It's also about restoration:

Our plan is to remove all the invasive plants at Bruce Vento Bird Sanctuary so that native plants can take over. So far we haven't reached our goal, but we are heading that direction. Little by little the native plants are fighting and coming back. Though it will be long and hard work, our goal of returning the land to prairie and oak woods to what it should be, is coming true. (Conservation Corps)

Bruce Vento is my home. It is such a great place to get away from the city. It's a great place to just sit and listen to the wind. It's great to be back with everyone.

Bruce Vento is peace in the city.

Working in the gardens, and pulling invasives requires expending energy and enduring the weather.

Bruce Vento! It's so hot! I am so tired, but it is my job to work. When it is so hot in Bruce Vento I feel like I am going to fall down when I am tackling the invasives. [But] I like it here! I feel great when I am doing something good, like pulling those invasives!
(Conservation Corps)

Little by little we can help the environment. We can change the world. Step by step. Burdock by Burdock.(Conservation Corps)

One Conservation Corp member wrote this scenario:

What would my boss say if I said, "I'm tired."

Me: I'm tired

Eric: What are you guys doing slacking off. You're Conservation Corps for Pete's sake.

Me: Sorry. I'm just tired. I'll get back to work

Eric: Yes, it's hot and I believe you're tired, but could you just work a little longer?

Me: Yes, sir. I will work harder, sir.

What I think about Eric

**Very nice person*

**Talks a lot, but that's what I like about him.*

**Cares about everyone*

**Willing to share*

**Good stories (ha ha!)*

Monday. Humid. No wind. The type[of day] that drains you of all your energy.
(Garden Corps)

And the rewards are palpable:

This year I am proudest when working at our Swede Hollow garden. Everything is so alive! The chards are huge! We will definitely have enough to feed the CSA members for quite a while. I love the burst of colors; from orange to green to red to yellow. They are the rainbow of our garden. (Garden Corps)

Its hard work and its hot! But I do appreciate jobs like this because it makes me think. This job makes me appreciate little things in life, in nature. Weeds, plants, hard work. You realize a lot about yourself and life in general. Yeah, some days, hot days, I just want to go home, but overall I enjoy this work. I'm helping the community. In a few years I'll go back to Bruce Vento and say, "Hey, I used to work down here." Going back to things I've done and simply being proud that I was able to do it. (Conservation Corps)

A job like this is too hard. Well, it is not too hard, but it is demanding. It teaches me to how to eat healthy and how to save our environment which benefits me and future generations. I learn how to live a better way, not just taking the easy way out. This place is a place to learn all the good stuff.

It all happens within and through creating community:

If I see myself in a community, I'll see others helping, lending hands together. Community is about welcoming people, having an idea or plan to do together. Our Garden Corps is part of a community because everyone comes from different places to work together, reaching out to a better and bigger community.

The cool thing is, I got to know most of the people and got along really well. We worked together as a team.

I'm glad I'm part of the Conservation Corps this summer. It's another chance to make a difference in my community. It's what I live and breathe in, so why not help it in any way I can?

There was much to learn.

About organics:

Our gardens save energy. We grow local food. The things that we sell are fresh out of the garden. When things are fresh, you can taste the flavor. It is way better than food shipped from Mexico and other faraway places using lots of oil and gas. Artificial fertilizers may make vegetables grow bigger but they don't taste better and won't have any more energy in them than those grown without. Growing organic pollutes air and water less. (Garden Corps)

About rain gardens:

Rain gardens help filter the water before it reaches the river. They need special plants with deep roots to clean the water. I think the Mississippi river is the most important

river in the U.S. We have to keep it clean here so states down south won't have to deal with polluted water. The more rain gardens there are, the better. (Conservation Corps)

About weeds:

I've learned a lot about plants that will help me in the future Like weeds are sometimes healthy for you [lamb's quarters, dandelion leaves]. There is one kind that helps bee stings. I also learned about quack grass. Its sharp like a needle and like many other weeds it shares the same root to root.

About bugs:

Today Neil came to talk [to our Garden Corps] about bugs. What he does is very cool because he works with insects, does experiments with them to help create bio-control, using insects instead of chemicals.

We got to look at and touch bugs like the hissing cockroach, millipedes, ants and beetles and worms.

Neil talked about worms and the soils worms make.

My favorite moment was when we got to eat Japanese beetles. It was fun and we got to eat raspberries, too!

I hope that by the end of this summer I won't be scared of bugs anymore.

And the utility of dog hair:

Today I learned about putting dog hair on the ground so rabbits won't come near the plants. They can smell the hair of the dog and get scared.

There were many speakers and field trips for both groups. Those particularly highlighted in the journals included the trip to a dairy farm, especially getting close to the animals; a rained out fishing excursion to Fort Snelling; learning about retail sales and cooking at Cooks of Crocus Hill and visiting the CDC conservation project in Minneapolis. Two talks were especially inspiring. One was about the history of the area where the Bruce Vento Bird Sanctuary is located. Another was a lively session of instruction about how to go camping. Cooking lessons and a potluck meal from the gardens were also favorites.

Learning about gardening and conservation, working hard in hot weather, learning to enjoy pulling weeds, all offered challenges. But entries in the journals suggested even more challenging was learning to become comfortable talking to people about their projects. The Conservation Corps took people on tours of Bruce Vento and made presentations at the Minnesota State Fair.

My biggest fear is talking to people:

- *Fear of choking and messing up*
- *Not knowing what to talk about*
- *When there are a lot of people*
- *When everyone is staring at you*
- *Having to talk by yourself*

The CDC staff works with the young people to help them make effective public presentations. Here is a list from one student's notes:

Interpretive techniques

- *Ask them questions. Make them think.*
- *Tell stories*
- *Show pictures. Compare then and now.*
- *Bring reference materials*
- *Show interest*
- *Build a story from your own experience*

The State Fair. Let's see. I think the lesson today helped us all be prepared. We all talk to people every day and engage with people daily. So I think we will all do fine. We'll all be together to help each other out, so it can't be that bad. It might be fun being part of an eco-experience.

I am back in CDC because I've learned a lot and I want to share my knowledge. I think the most important thing I learned was speaking and presenting myself so I will be able to teach others what I have been taught.

The process of learning was significant as well as what was learned:

We have more freedom here. We have room to learn on our own. We can be creative with our learning. The way that we learn makes and keeps everything that we learn personal, so it's important to us.

Reflections at the end of the summer:

My first summer in the Garden Corp was fun. I like being here. To be honest, I hated weeding at the beginning. Then I got used to it and started to like it. Harvesting was fun, too, because you get to pick which vegetables are ready for the CSA and the market. I love planting beans, spinach and all the rest. Being in the Garden Corp was the best opportunity for me to be outside and make new friends.

I have learned so much, from how to harvest things to things about Hmong culture from interns that are Hmong. I have really enjoyed my time working in the gardens and with all the other interns. Yes, I am excited for school to start, but then I'm going to be wishing that summer would be back so I can start working with the Garden Corps again.

The summer is almost over and there has been much that I've done. There are so many experiences and memories gained by being part of this group, this team. It has been such a good time that it saddens me to leave. Though I will visit from time to time I will always remember this job because it created the best summer I ever had. (Conservation Corps)

I can hardly wait to start making wreaths. (Garden Corps)