
Ecology Corps offers outdoor work experience to Petaluma youth

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Luis Sanchez has some big plans for his future.

The 17-year-old Petaluma High School student hopes to become a police officer, and he wants to cultivate a garden at his future home – a place that might provide a respite from the stress of his law enforcement career.

This summer, he's building skills to bring him closer to both of his goals as he works at the Petaluma Bounty Farm, a three-acre community garden where produce for local food access initiative programs is cultivated.

"I'm learning about so many things with plants and how plant life works and how to grow plants, vegetables and fruits in a nice sustainable way," he said, gazing at the field of vegetables, herbs and flowers on a sunny July afternoon as he took a break from turning the beds for a new crop.

Sanchez is part of a group of about 10 local youth working this summer under the supervision of Petaluma People Services Center as part of the Sonoma County Youth Ecology Corps, a program that's providing employment for more than 80 young adults ages 16 to 24 across the county this season. Since its founding in 2009, the corps has employed more than 1,300 young adults, according to the program website.

Sanchez and his peers, many of whom are at-risk youth, are gaining more than just gardening skills and a crash course in sustainable agriculture – they're also getting a positive lesson about teamwork, leadership, responsibility, communication and professional work ethic though the eight-week summer initiative, program leaders said.

The group also attends weekly classes as part of the 24-hour work week, where they learn a mix of practical and professional skills like problem solving on the job, creating a

resume, dressing professionally and maintaining a positive attitude, according to Vernon Pope, the case manager who works with youth in the program. A job opportunity fair was also held July 26 at the Santa Rosa Finley Community Center.

"This is changing the game in a numerous amount of ways," Pope said.

At the farm, youth spend time with groups that visit on field trips and also interact with families through the "Farmacy" program where food is sold at the Petaluma Health Center, which provides retail experience, Petaluma People Services Center Executive Director Elece Hempel said.

"When they leave the farm, they have a very full resume of skills they've been exposed to that make them desirable," Hempel said.

For 20-year-old Steven Placencia, who's been participating in the program for about five summers, meeting new people has been the pinnacle. He's been able to educate those who come to the farm about the tricks of the trade, and also break through some personal barriers.

"I liked how I was outside and I got to talk to people more," he said of his first year. "Back then I didn't really talk to people."

Bounty Farm Education and Engagement Coordinator Katie Haberman said giving back and teaching skills to others brings the experience full circle.

"Some of the youth have been recipients of youth access programs, lived in shelters and gone through foster care themselves and it's a really unique opportunity for them to be in the position of the one who's providing – they get to be the one to go to the shelters and donate the food we have left over," she said. "They have that opportunity to be growing and giving and providing services in the community that perhaps they haven't had the opportunity or privilege to do before."

For their work, the youth are paid between \$10.50 and \$12.50 an hour based on skill level, and depending on their needs, some are placed in roles at other local nonprofit agencies such as the Boys and Girls Club, Hempel said.

The job training program is sponsored by the county's Water Agency, Human Services Department, Workforce Investment Board and the Office of Education as well as the nonprofit group New Ways to Work. Participants who complete conservation-related public projects are employed and supervised by a variety of organizations throughout the county, including Petaluma People Services Center.

At the Petaluma nonprofit, the ecology corps is just one component in a portfolio of services for qualifying youth, including mentoring, referrals, career planning and paid internships. The center is currently working to expand its reach to partner with local businesses and pair youth with entrepreneurs to provide more year-round opportunities for career exploration, Hempel said.

Participants will also have the option to continue working at the farm outside of the concentrated summer program, she said.

Though the farm work can be grueling, at the end of the day, the youth agreed the toil was worth the gain. With a grin, Sanchez said he's grateful to be able to play a role in providing the community with an abundance of fresh, healthy food.

"It's pretty cool and neat to help families," he said. "It feels great."

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