

Ecology program puts teens to work

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Kaylene Barber and Jessie Trujillo put up a fence last week at Maxwell Farms Regional Park.

Bill Hoban/Index-Tribune

For some of them, it was the first time they'd earned a paycheck.

Now, after eight weeks of work, the paychecks have stopped but the 175 or so teens from all over Sonoma County have something they can put on their resumes - a job.

And they can point with pride at some of the projects they've accomplished this summer while working for the Sonoma County Youth Ecology Corps.

Kaylene Barber, 16, and Jessie Trujillo, also 16, are part of a 25-member local crew that has spent the summer on projects in the Sonoma Valley.

Last Tuesday, they were working on putting up a fence near Verano Avenue in Maxwell Farms Regional Park. It was the first job for both of them.

"We've picked up trash, took out non-native plants and spent two weeks at the Bouverie (Preserve in Glen Ellen) widening trails for kids," Trujillo said.

Barber pointed out that they've also taken out a lot of blackberries at Maxwell Farms Regional Park - even if some got eaten.

"I saved my first check," Barber said.

Trujillo said he saved some of his first check.

The teens worked four hours a day, four days a week at various venues around the Valley, including two at Pets Lifeline.

The nonprofit Social Advocates for Youth is the subcontractor for the program in Santa Rosa and Sonoma Valley.

Jennifer Newhoff, summer jobs coordinator for SAY, said this year the program lost some of its participants - but not because they couldn't hack the work. "We lost some kids who found full-time work," she said.

One of the projects the teens accomplished at Maxwell Farms was building about nine steps from one path to another back by Sonoma Creek.

Ishmael Chavez, 18, is one of the team members who worked on the steps.

"We were clearing a path and widening a trail and said, 'let's make some steps.'"

That required approval from Sonoma County Regional Parks, but "John Ryan from regional parks gave them the OK," said Newhoff.

Regional Parks paid for the materials including railroad ties, gravel and other materials to complete the project.

Doing it all by hand, the crew worked three-to-four weeks to complete the steps.

"It was hard work," Chavez said. "We were lucky that there was a tree that kept us in the shade most of the time."

Matt Martin, executive director of SAY, said word of the steps project reached Santa Rosa. "It's legendary," he said with a laugh.

Chavez, who just graduated from SVHS this June, said he heard about the Ecology Corps at school and decided to apply.

"It's kind of sad that it's over," he said.

First District Supervisor Valerie Brown, who toured Maxwell Farms Tuesday morning to see the projects, called the ecology corps a value to the community.

"I went back to Washington, D.C. recently and told them, 'you can't cut this program,'" she reported. And she praised the program members saying, "what a great thing to have on your resume."

Countywide, the program cost \$634,246 and was funded by the Workforce Investment Act through the Sonoma County Workforce Investment Board, and by flood-control funds from the Sonoma County Water Agency for creek enhancement work.