Shadow Cast

There is strong shadow where there is much light - Goethe

There are a lot of perks to one’s AmeriCorps service being in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, fresh air and a beautiful and tranquil setting being but a couple. But there’s also the opportunity to try on different hats and gain valuable experience. As Kendra Straub, Data Manager for GSMNP, describes, AmeriCorps members and staff alike are invited to participate in the job shadowing program administered by the park’s training and development team. The program is simple: folks interested in job shadowing someone work with the team to be paired appropriately. Some of the shadow opportunities last a few hours, some last for a full day, and others follow a project and therefore have flexible timelines.

This program allows AmeriCorps members to investigate career paths that are not associated with their current position. They are invited to think strategically about the career they would like to have in the future. What skills and experiences are they lacking? Is there someone in the park who has those skills? This process has led to job shadow pairings that would not have been initiated without the program.  

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Ms. Kalil

By Jason Scott

As we walked the halls of Inskip Elementary, a little girl drinking at a water fountain caught sight of Kalil, smiled, and gave her a warm hug before turning around and going about her day. Several other times during my visit this happened, painting a clear picture of the relationship that “Ms. Kalil”, as she is affectionately addressed, has with the kids at the school. Kalil White is in her second year of service with CAC AmeriCorps, serving with UT Community Schools at Inskip Elementary.

It was a mild, sunny, fall day when we sat down to talk about her year of service thus far, and she spoke on the progress she’s made in terms of building a highly functional relationship with the community for which she feels responsible. It’s been an evolving relationship, one boosted by her developing outdoor programing initiatives that connect with specific curriculum where teachers will now stop her in the hall to ask about getting their pupils outside.

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For CAC AmeriCorps, Kalil is an environmental educator. For her site and her community, she is an advocate for bringing as many resources and opportunities to the school as possible. Recent energies have been toward establishing a food pantry to benefit the children and families of Inskip Elementary and providing garden-to-table cooking classes to nurture relationships between family members. Kalil has secured a space and has established a relationship with a local food pantry to get 1,000 pounds of food a week for her cause; she just needs a refrigerator to make sure that the produce stays fresh longer. And a washer and dryer would also be useful, if anyone has a lead.

Because of her consistency, presence, and passionate efforts to bring people together to strengthen the piece of the community she is charged with serving, “Ms.” is a badge of honor that Kalil has earned from the children, families, and teachers of her school, and CAC AmeriCorps is proud to be witness to her clear commitment to serving others.

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For Emily Richardson, with the AmeriCorps Data Management and GIS team, the job shadow program has allowed her to assist the Park’s Environmental Protection Specialist with spatial analyses and report writing for NEPA reviews pertaining to policies affecting endangered and threatened species. This valuable experience helps her in contributing to important policy writing and will ultimately make her stand out on a resume. Maryrose Kulick, also with GIS, has been able to shadow a fire effects monitoring team and wildlife technicians during bear workups. These experiences have given her the chance to get outside, learn the names of trees and the natural history of wildlife, and get exposed to career paths she may not have otherwise considered.

The AmeriCorps members with the Forestry-Vegetation Management team, Marlee Jennings, Jesse Parker, Sean Melvin, and Chris Gontarski, affectionately known as the “Veg Crew”, have done much more than pulling weeds, also broadening their skills and experiences across the park.

With fisheries they have collected water samples and monitored stream quality. They’ve done multiple bear work-ups and boar management with the wildlife team, and they’ve assisted with graveyard restoration, filling in graves and putting in native plants to prevent erosion. They’ve learned about ginseng poaching and how to evaluate ginseng root health and to prepare documents as court evidence.

They’ve completed their Wildland Incident Qualification training, which includes passing exams and an arduous three-mile walk while wearing 45 pounds in under 45 minutes, qualifying them to assist in a prescribed burn this spring. They’ve gathered, cleaned, and processed grassland seeds for planting along the Blue Ridge Parkway, and they’ve completed search and rescue training and have assisted with several carry-out teams.

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Second Serving?

For those thinking of serving a second year with CAC AmeriCorps, we are able to offer $150 toward professional development training. Through an agreement with the Alliance for Better Nonprofits, this will allow you to earn a certificate in leadership, human resources, fund raising, or marketing.

Also, the additional end-of-service education award covers all the tuition for an MBA from Carson-Newman University in Nonprofit Leadership, and second year members get first dips on consideration for service sites.

Any interested CAC AmeriCorps members should contact our office right away. Recruitment has begun!
On November 14th, several of our VISTA Corps Members visited the Beck Cultural Exchange Center to learn more about Knoxville’s history and the history of race and racial tensions in Knoxville. We were honored to be given a talk by Reverend Renée Kesler, President and CEO of the Beck. Ms. Kesler provided us a greater understanding of the historical and cultural context of the Black community in Knoxville through stories about the race riots of the Red Summer of 1919 and the impacts of Knoxville’s Urban Renewal on the African-American community.

In mid-December we were treated to a special tour of UT’s Fabrication Lab, a maker space of automated chiseling, routering, cutting, etching, and 3D printing wonder. Gale Fulton, Director of the School of Landscape Architecture and our guide for the tour, schooled us about the 9-axis robotic arm, the carbon fiber creations, and the water-jet cutter, with a 4x4 hunk of steel it had sliced through as evidence of its prowess. And artifacts of the cultivated creativity surrounded us, from terraformed landscapes shaped in rigid foam to wood carved according to a digital design, from abstract pieces of spun fiber to steel butterflies destined for a garden. Transforming through innovation is a fitting summation of what they do.

December Gathering

For each end-of-year meeting for the CAC Board there are an extra 50 to 60 extra attendees. This is day when each of the CAC AmeriCorps members step up, introduce themselves, and state where they serve and what wonderful things they do.

Follow this with a holiday potluck with all the trimmings and a white elephant gift exchange, and it’s a good time for reconnecting with friends before dispersing out to holiday destinations.
Have something you would like to share for the next issue? Please contact us so that we may include it: mark.carper@knoxcac.org; 865-564-3500 ext. 1120