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Montana Conservation Corps expands
youth program with BCBSMT grant

BREATH OF FRESH AIR:

BCBSMT, American Lung Association partner
on new program to improve childhood asth-
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MONTANA CONSERVATION CORPS USES HEALTHY KIDS, HEALTHY FAMILIES GRANT TO EXPAND YOUTH PROGRAM, IMPACT ON TEENS

Never judge a book solely by its cover.

It's a phrase Jono McKinney, CEO and President of the Montana Conservation Corps, has heard often and believes personifies the organization he leads.

A snapshot of MCC no doubt tells a vibrant story. It may feature chainsaw-wielding crews removing conifers to clear a hiking trail or a group of smiling kids in hard hats helping to improve wildlife habitat. The sweat equity behind annually completing more than 200 projects across Montana is easily captured in a photo. Especially with Montana's majestic beauty serving as a picturesque backdrop to everything MCC does.

The real magic, McKinney insists, doesn't just come from those finished projects, illustrated and promoted with a single click of a camera. The core of MCC is the transformation that takes place in the more than 500 young people who participate in its programs each year.

"Montana Conservation Corps is first and foremost an organization dedicated to developing young people," McKinney said. "The work we do is a means and not an end for our mission. What we really do is develop future leaders who will be healthier and more active in their communities."

Developing young people into leaders isn't easily captured in a single moment. It is a process, one that has the natural ebbs and flows, highs and lows, of working with teenagers.

Expanding its outreach to young people prompted MCC to apply for a \$50,000 Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Montana Healthy Kids, Health Families grant – one of



BCBSMT's signature community investment initiatives designed to improve the health and wellness of Montana children and families. Healthy Kids, Healthy Families grants focus on five key social pillars: physical activity, nutrition, disease prevention and management, supporting safe environments, and suicide prevention. The successful MCC application strongly represented each of those ideals.

The organization plans on utilizing the \$50,000 award to expand its youth programs and increase the number of teens served in 2017 to 300, along with a host of other activities that will support that effort.

Developing teens into leaders starts well before the teens arrive for their summer expedition. Crew leaders go through the MCC Leadership Development Program for three months during the spring. The training is a mix of wilderness skills, leadership development, and organizational values. In other words, crew leaders learn how to handle chainsaws and administer first aid, work on team building and conflict resolution, as well as developing a strong work ethic and a deep respect for the environment.

Once crew leaders have successfully completed the program, they are paired with a co-leader, and the pair works with groups of four to six youth members. It is up to the crew leaders to then pass on what they have learned to the members of their group, all while working together to complete various conservation projects.

Expeditions can last from one week up to four, providing ample time for crew leaders and members to bond and grow together.

Personal growth is something that David Johnson, a crew leader who helped guide a pair of month-long sessions last year, took away from his experience. Originally from Connecticut, Johnson ventured out to Montana and MCC after talking to relatives who were adult leaders back in the early 2000s. Having a passion for working with kids and protecting the environment, Johnson thought MCC would be fun and worthwhile, and made the commitment to become a crew leader. Although there were challenges that he had not anticipated, Johnson said he enjoyed the overall experience.

by the numbers

EMPLOYEE GIVING CAMPAIGN

United Way: **\$16,837**

Blue Bear Relief Fund: **\$6,048**

Montana Shares: **\$8,552**

BCBSMT COMMUNITY INVESTMENTS

Disease Management: **\$45,000**

Physical Activity: **\$290,000**

Nutrition: **\$30,000**

Mental Health/Suicide Prevention: **\$62,000**

Creating Safe Environments: **\$132,000**

TOTAL: \$559,000

NUMBER OF NONPROFIT GROUPS: **90**

"The work with Montana Conservation Corps is really rewarding because you grow with the people you work with," Johnson said. "Looking back, you realize you are asking these kids to do a lot. At the end of my second session, one of the kids said that his most positive takeaway from the summer was the pride he had gained in himself and the fact he had a new sense of what he could do. That was really neat to see."

There are several adjustments for the young adults who join the program and take part in the expeditions and other projects throughout the state. These include being away from their parents for an extended period of time, sleeping in tents and having to make daily decisions with other peers, to name a few. Take those changes and then add on daily tasks that usually involve physical labor in the summer heat, and it's clear to see how everyone is pushed as individuals.

The hardest adjustment for many, however, occurs during the first moments of their expedition when they must leave behind their cellphones and other technology. Crew leaders do carry cell phones, but teen participants are essentially unplugged from technology. No Facebook, no Snapchats, no Twitter.

Although they disconnect from technology, they become connected with their crew members, crew leaders, and the environment. Each day they learn how to better communicate and work as a team, along with

completing their daily projects. And there may be no better place to talk and bond than a nightly campfire.

"We are taking kids out of their regular context to serve and learn in wild places. For a lot of youth this is their first experience of living in the outdoors," McKinney said. "In these places, working with a crew, they make a visible difference with each day's work. This builds competence and confidence.

"They also explore the edges of their communication skills and gain awareness of their ability to be leaders among their peers," McKinney added. "By taking young people out of their regular element and challenging them, they grow and discover more about themselves. They also discover how beautiful Montana is, and see how they can help keep it that way."

The more participants in MCC youth programs, the more people can benefit, both directly and indirectly. It's a lot of work, but what also happens during those long days, is that young people grow as individuals. And, of course, the more individuals there are in MCC programs means more projects can be completed each year throughout the state.

That leads back to the cover photos of Montana Conservation Corps and the projects that are completed each year. During his two four-week stints, Johnson's crews cross-cut logs off a trail in the Gates of the Mountains, helped with BLM fencing projects in the Pryors, maintained trails and the pass at the Rocky Mountain Front on Headquarters Creek, and marked fence to prevent sage grouse from being injured. Any image from those projects would create an inviting book cover for MCC.

McKinney believes that those cover photos, along with each story of personal transformation, form the lasting impression Montana Conservation Corps has on every teenager after they spend time in Montana's wilderness.

"Your Montana Conservation Corps experience is really just the beginning of what we're about," McKinney said. "Our success is best measured when our graduates put those skills and awareness to work in their daily lives."

"That goes back to the idea that young people are part of the solution. We hope that MCC inspires them to make the changes they want in their own lives and to make a difference in their community going forward."

To learn more about the Montana Conservation Corps, please visit www.mtcorps.org. For more information on expeditions, or on how to become a crew leader, email apply@mtcorps.org. 