

Hannah Witscher, MCEM Summer Works Intern



Hannah is a 2019 Summer Works Intern with Multnomah County Office of Emergency Management, and this high school student already has a lot of emergency experience. Here we asked Hannah to share more.

Hi! Tell us a little about yourself.

I've lived in NE Portland all my life. I'm going to be a senior at Grant High School next year.

How did you hear about the Summer Works Program?

When Justin [Ross] came to talk to our Search and Rescue [SAR] team after the Eagle Creek Fire and mentioned the Summer Works Internship. I was really intrigued by it and kept it in my mind for this summer.

I was kind of familiar already with Emergency Management through SAR and have extended family that work in emergency response so had heard about it through those things.

Please tell more about your involvement with SAR.

I'm a team leader. We are responsible for finding missing hikers, mostly in the Gorge. We also help with evidence searches, events, and evacuations, such as with the Eagle Creek Fire.

How did you get involved with SAR?

I heard about it from a friend who had an older brother who had done it. I joined with that friend and one other friend, and out of those three I'm the only one still doing it.

What sort of training did you go through for SAR?

First a year of basic training. We joke that it's every Wednesday night for the rest of your life. And that's kind of true. I feel like every Wednesday night is spent with SAR. We spend those nights learning classroom stuff, such as navigation with a map and compass, first aid training, how to navigate the trails of the Gorge. To get more field experience we do more training once a month where we spend the weekend practicing what we learned in our Wednesday meetings and applying them to the field, like doing more advanced navigation and practicing different medical scenarios.

What do you enjoy most about SAR?

It sounds pretty cheesy and kind of cliché but I really enjoy getting to help people. The experience of knowing that you very literally saved someone's life is a really good experience to have and very motivating. And I really love my team, they're really great people and I really enjoy spending time with them even when that time is at 3:00 am in the rain.

Would you mind sharing a most memorable SAR memory?

Probably my strongest memory of a search was a couple of months ago after one of our training outings. It was our snow outing, so we had been sleeping in snow caves, doing a lot of snowshoeing, and were just exhausted. I got home around noon on Sunday and less than 2 hours later my phone goes off for a search. I rushed to get to the search. We end up hiking up Multnomah Falls to find a hiker who had gone too far and couldn't get back. There were several feet of snow at the highest point. I hadn't really slept the night before and was mostly running on adrenaline. But we found the hiker, and we were able to get him dry clothes and snow shoes and hiked back down to Multnomah Lodge with him. The experience of finding someone who was cold and alone and lost definitely made up for the lack of sleep that weekend.

Let's talk about your internship. What types of projects will you be working on during your internship with MCEM?

The biggest project is the plan for wildfires: getting to use what I learned during the Eagle Creek Fire, the issues that we ran into there, and getting to redesign the plan for doing door-to-door evacuations. It's really cool to have an impact on the things that I've used before and be able to make them better.

How long will this internship last?

I started June 18, and will continue through August, when I go back to school.

What are your plans for after graduation?

I'm going to go to college and probably study earth science or environmental science.

What have you learned that you could share with other youth?

I feel like I've learned that a lot of emergency preparation is about having a network, so on a personal level it's about knowing your neighbors and all that. Even on a bigger organizational level in emergency management it's about connections and relationships between organizations or groups.