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OutDoor Oregon supporters hope to repeat jobs program for teens

By Angela Webber

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Paul Ginochio II of Beaverton clears blackberry bushes as part of a wetland restoration project in Tualatin. Ginochio was one of 100 Oregon teens employed by OutDoor Oregon this summer. OutDoor Oregon, funded by stimulus money, hopes it can keep employing teens next year with money from community partners.

After Paul Ginochio II graduated from the Arts and Communication Magnet Academy in Beaverton, he had a hard time getting a job.

“I just got out of high school, had no experience and no car — plus the bad economy meant that people didn’t want to hire,” Ginochio said.

Lucky for the then-19-year-old, the Northwest Youth Corps created a program specifically for teens like him: kids who are willing to work hard, but can’t find a job in the economy.

The OutDoor Oregon program provides five-week, full-time jobs for teens aged 16 to 19, to work on environmental enhancement work in their areas.

Ginochio’s team, based in Washington County, included teens from Beaverton, Aloha and Tigard. Each week, the team partnered with a different local organization to enhance a natural area in need.

The OutDoor Oregon program was created by Northwest Youth Corps and was paid for mostly by stimulus funds. Now that that money has been used, program organizers hope they can use the program's success and partnerships in the community to keep the ball rolling.

"This could mean a reduction or an increase (in the program), depending on how much we can piece together," said Tom Helmer, OutDoor Oregon's program director.

Last year more than 100 teens were hired for the five-week program, and they worked to enhance natural spaces in their communities.

Ginochio's team cleared out blackberries at Apache Bluff in Tualatin as part of a partnership with the Wetlands Conservancy.

"The teens were all very respectful and hard working," said Jennifer Wilson, urban land steward for the Wetlands Conservancy. "Not only were they out there doing work, but they appreciated the goal of improving the habitat."

Wilson said the teens were interested in environmental work. She was glad to help them take a step forward in career training and "open doors" for employment.

Ginochio, who couldn't find a job before the OutDoor Oregon program, said the experience helped him get his current job at a commercial landscaping company.

The program has many benefits for the teens, said Helmer, including providing work in a time when jobs that would go to teens are often taken by adults who can't find a job elsewhere. In addition, the program teaches teens about work and responsibility, he said.

"They aren't just learning about conservation but about showing up every day and working with a group of people you don't know," Helmer said.

"You've got to be willing to work hard, and really want to be there," said Ginochio. He encourages teens who want to have a good time and do their best to "give it a try."

In the summer of 2010, the program's cost for partners was low — very low. Stimulus funds paid for so much of the program that Wilson said hiring the teens was "ridiculously cheap."

Helmer said his organization will meet in January with people from cities, counties, parks and environmental groups to work out continuing partnerships. Right now, he said, grants from philanthropic organizations will probably pay for 40 percent of what is needed, leaving 60 percent for the organization or government to cover.

The money pays for administration, the teens' and their organizers' wages, and insurance and supplies. The cost of a five-week, 10-employee team costs about \$34,000. For one week, a partner group would pay about \$4,000, Helmer said.

Wilson said she hopes that the logistics will work out so the Wetlands Conservancy can hire an OutDoor Oregon team again for summer 2011.

“We are interested in working with them again,” Wilson said. “I would love to have even more positive impact on these kids.”