

THE OUTSIDER

Behind the Scenes

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It was a little after 6 a.m., and the Northwest Youth Corps camp slowly came alive east of Oakridge.

The girls were up first, and began preparing breakfast. Tanger started mixing pancake batter.

On the other side of camp, someone stirred. I'll leave him anonymous, for obvious reasons. He walked to the trailer filled with gear, found himself a trowel, and disappeared into the woods.

Ah, yep, when they say they are "roughing" it, well, now you understand that what we're talking about.

Group leader Kate admitted quickly that pancakes were not her forte, and four massive mounds of batter on the blazing hot griddle backed up her point. Leila quickly learned how to handle a flipper under the most challenging of conditions.

Later Twitch got a lesson in mixing pancake batter. The pancakes went through an evolutionary progression from Neanderthal to Cro-Mangan to Modern Man.

Not that it mattered. As the Neanderthals were flipped, the girls got the thumbs up to go wake the boys. Yeah, they like to get up early to make breakfast. Right. Wink-wink, nudge-nudge.

Soon 10 teenagers were sauntering about, tying work boots, spreading Nutella, honey, jam and just about anything else you could imagine, on the pancakes before eating them burrito style that is, sans dishes that would have to be washed.

With some eyes barely open, Kate announced the bus leaves in 12 minutes. Sure enough, 12 minutes later, hard hats on, they piled into the bus for the 1-mile drive up to the trailhead.

Road 380 ends at the trailhead of the High Divide Trail, a tremendous overview of the Oregon landscape. With snow-capped Sisters as our backdrop, we drew into a circle for innovative stretches and safety reviews.

We spent the better part of the next 20 minutes talking about safety procedures and dancing around. What do I mean by innovative?

Well, Colin opted for the stretching exercise aptly called, "Jerry Springer."

It begins with you leaning forward with your right arm extended, shaking a pointed finger while you say, "You don't know me." You repeat with the left. Then right. Then left.

Next you squiggle your finger like an "S-curve" road sign, following the same motion with your body, as you say, "No, you DID-ent!" Again, right, left, right, left.

Then lunge backward, reaching back to pantomime picking up and throwing a chair across the stage with a mighty heave-ho.

Lastly you throw your arms behind your back, as if handcuffed, as you struggle forward while restraining yourself shouting, "Hold me back, hold me back!"

Oh, there are more n air-guitaring, penguin impersonating, etc. but you get the idea. They are a creative, fun-loving bunch.

Finally, we load up with our tools and water containers, and embark on a 25-minute hike up the trail, through the section they have worked on since Monday.

We double-back down steep switchbacks, down along two more peaceful ponds in the middle of the forest. We finally reach the point where they left off the day before.

We split into groups n lopers and diggers. The lopers move ahead, cutting vegetation. We follow, scraping the trail to its proper width and contouring its edges.

And so it goes, on and on. We eventually pause for our 15-minute morning break. Later we take 30 minutes for lunch. Other than that, it's nonstop hard labor, transforming an overgrown trail into an inviting thing of beauty.

I'm not sure what I expected, really, from a group of teenagers ages 14-16. When they rumbled out of their tents this morning they looked like your average batch of teens.

This didn't look like the varsity football team, the debate team or the cheerleaders. It looked like any bunch of kids you might see at the park or the mall.

You could pin any number of typical negative Hollywood teen stereotypes onto them just pick your movie and, of course, you'd be completely wrong. They aren't slackers. They aren't posers. They aren't consumed with attitude. They are simply kids.

One by one, sometime during the day, each found a reason to spend some time working near me and strike up a conversation. Some were short. Some were long. All made me feel more than welcome.

L.J. spent most of the morning on the ground, sawing down saplings in the way. Eventually we both were sort of bringing up the rear. She struck up a conversation.

Like many, this is her second year with the Corps. She loves the time spent in nature. She's proud of the work. Proud of the camaraderie.

She points out that, of course, when someone stumbles across them out in the middle of Mother Nature, wearing matching hard hats and work shirts, with their white Northwest Youth Corps van parked somewhere near, people jump to conclusions.

Most people think we're juvenile delinquents who are out here because we have to be, L.J. says, when the complete opposite is true. We're all out here because we want to be.

She says one young couple with a few kids passed by them a few days ago. without the slightest ounce of discretion, the couple made some derogatory comments about the kids, assuming they were sentenced to this labor.

It hurt, L.J., said, because spending three or four weeks out in nature, roughing it, while making friends not to mention a difference n is something they do from their hearts. It's a labor of love, really.

If you can't spend some time with the kids to realize that, just take a look at the nice trail you're on next time you hike, and maybe you'll understand.

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