

The LDP Experience for Me and You – the Long-Winded Approach

I will begin this by saying that everyone gets something a little different out of LDP. This is because of the inherent nature of the program, and how many variables that it includes – from the particular mix of people on your crew of adults, the projects available to you that specific time, and heck even the weather is going to play a role, as you will be spending your next 6 or 14 weeks outside, working closely with the elements, the soil and the sky, and the perspectives of those around you. Lets also not forget the youth, for it not for them, you wouldn't be here in the first place. LDP has a way of arming people with fortitude, stoicism, and a drive that they may not have had before. This is how it was for me, and for the many people I have seen pass through the hallowed halls of LDP since my time (as I in fact supervise the program in which long LDP participants work with youth in).

Here's my story with LDP. I found it while at a transitional phase of my life, you know, the one we all seem to go through in our 20's somewhere, figuring out what direction we want to head with our lives. Not having known anyone from Northwest Youth Corps or even knowing that such things a conservation corps existed at all, I was somewhat in shock of my discovery – perhaps you are in the same boat - and I really had no clue what to expect.

This is how the job announcement spoke to me – “We will pay YOU a sizable chunk of money to train YOU to work with youth in the outdoors in the National Forests, Parks, and Wilderness areas of the Pacific Northwest. Plus, you get to DIG TRAIL, CAMP, see amazing scenery, be incredibly satisfied with your work on many, many levels, and be challenged in ways you never have before. Oh, and don't forget the new muscles you will be forced to earn, and the only thing you will lose is the weight you put on in college”. All these things it spoke to me, and I replied “Sign me up!”

Let me just say – I got way more than I bargained for. In a good way. It's hard to relate the LDP experience in words, but I guess I am giving it a shot, because in retrospect, I would have liked to have read something like this to give me a better idea of what I was getting into. Then again, maybe not knowing provided some of the pleasure and excitement!

At the beginning of the training phase of LDP, I had a hard time accepting the whole “NYC” thing – I didn't understand, I was a little confused and perhaps unsure as to exactly what was being accomplished by what seemed like an evil overlord (that would be my Crew Leader – thanks, Sean!) taking my freedoms away from me, only to fill ALL my free time with lesson plans, discussions, scenarios – all this stuff that wouldn't just let me chill in the woods. If you think that this program is going to be a relaxing respite in the woods, where you will get to write in your journal everyday reflecting on the finer

things in life, build your “My Side of the Mountain” tree shelter, catch water-striders in the creek, turn over rocks to look for salamanders and frolic with the butterflies, then just know up front, from me, this program is NOT for you. You might want to try one of those wilderness-therapy or camp programs, ‘cause NYC is not a “bad kids boot camp”, nor is it “summer camp” – it is a “work experience”.

This lifestyle was something I resisted for quite some time (during the training phase). In hindsight, I think the adjustment of going from an independent 20-something to a group-oriented mentality was a main culprit in my reluctance to want to understand why NYC was such a great thing – something to be marveled at. I refused to understand it until about week four. Then I finally got “it”. I “bought in” to NYC, as they call it – understood why we did things the way we do, and realized how beneficial it was to work with youth with these precepts that will help them and ourselves open up to things we never knew. I will say, however, it was hard for me to get to that level. It is easier for some, harder for others. But I finally gave up my stubbornness to accept other ways of doing things, other perspectives to keep I mind, and realized how, as a group, we could accomplish amazing things when we set ourselves to it.

Let me break down an average day for you. Here we go... are you ready? Wake up, usually before sunrise, and do your best to pull yourself from the warm-womb of your sleeping bag into the harsh, cold and dark world. You’ve slept with your headlamp on your head, cause it will save you the thirty precious seconds it would take to find it otherwise (and you’ll figure out other ways to shave off time getting ready), so you use those bonus seconds massaging your toes and whispering sweet-nothings to them. Now muffle the conversation by stuffing your feet into those glorious leather work boots and tying them tight. Stumble on over and crowd around with the others on your team underneath the kitchen tarp, and scrape together a quick and caloric-riddled breakfast (you’re gonna need each and every one of those calories very shortly). After cleaning up the breakfast scene, you tuck in your work shirt and get an olfactory burst reminder that you haven’t showered in 4 sweaty days as you button up (hey, there aren’t any showers in the backcountry), and your headlamp flickers in agreement, dimly reminding you that you’ve been using those same batteries for quite a while now.

Back at your tent, you “bombproof” it in case A) The winds kick up today while you are at work B) The local raccoons and squirrels launch an assault on your gear and/or C) It rains. No one likes wet gear, and the nearest dryer is a 3-hour hike followed by a 3-hour drive, one-way, away.

So now you’re ready for work? Only after you’ve done all this, made sure camp is clean (all food items stored properly, no personal items left out), grabbed the shotgun (whoa whoa!!! This is what we call our lunch backpack), packed your raingear, have all the tools you’ll need for the day laid out, and are ENTIRELY ready for work, with all your PPG on in less than 30 minutes!!! Strap that helmet to your dome - now, you’re ready. Don’t forget to bring enough water!

Safety Circle. This is when your team each brings a safety concern to light for the “heightened awareness” of all, and follows that with a stretch, dance, game – whatever it takes to get the muscles warmed up and blood pumping. This is when you truly wake up.

Time to strike out to your project site with your comrades, all of whom you will know extensively and intensely during your LDP experience. The hike in to the project site warms up those blisters on your toes and you quietly chastise yourself, realizing you lied to them earlier, but also realizing you’ll be proud of those resulting calluses one day. You arrive at the worksite. Today you learn how to build a rock retaining wall. Your day is intense. You swing your tool with purpose, burying it deep into the thick soil, wrenching that submersed log out of the thick duff, or rolling that huge boulder down the mountainside with 3 of your teammates. The trail is now clear. It is practical. It is sustainable (or at least more now than it was). Whatever you are doing, your tool is moving – and so are you, at all times while you are on the clock. This pushes your physical, mental, social, and yes, your spiritual boundaries each and every day you are on the trail. You get stronger, more resilient. Soon, you can swing that tool longer. You can push further without tiring. You don’t mind the taste of your sweat coursing over your face as you swing that tool with unbridled fury, pounding out trail like a machine - because that’s what you’ve become – a trail machine. You scream as the adrenaline releases and you sever that last root holding the whole damn stump in, thrusting it to the sky like a scalp. The call for “Tool count!!!!” bounces from tree trunk to tree trunk, signaling the end of the work day. The day is yours!! Victory!!! You’ve made a difference. You ate PB&J like they’re going out of style. You took 15 minute breaks, not 16 or 19 minute breaks. And you marvel at the majestic view (very frequent in this line of work) and reflect on how far you have come. It is a satisfaction you have never felt before. And you’ll feel it again tomorrow.

You feel accomplished as your sweat-sprinkling band of trail-eaters hikes back over the work you have completed this week. It is a true sight to hold – and the sweat, blood, and tears you left here marks your significant effort on the boot soles of those who will pass after you for years and years to come.

Ok, let me pause for a moment from my little cathartic narrative. Perhaps you’ve decided that this is NOT for you, and I have sufficiently scared you off. Perhaps you cherish the soft skin on your hands. Perhaps you don’t particularly cherish the thought of smelling your own body odor and others for days on end in the woods, and you’d rather shower once more than every other Blue Moon. Possibly you think that those of us who would subject ourselves to such demanding torture are demented, surely not altogether here, or there for that matter. Maybe your interest has been piqued? If so, read on...

Back at camp, it's time to pry those boots off from the eight hours of working and an additional one-hour foot-battering hike to top it off. The plants around your feet wither and die (kidding!) as your feet breathe. You have a small amount of personal time to be ready for chores. Somebody dirt-a-lized a Pulaski today, that'll need to get sharpened out. Dinner needs to be made. Tomorrow's lunch needs assembled. Various things need to be accomplished, and you tackle them as a team. As one cohesive unit, these things get done, the best they can get done. Because your group has integrity, each being hand selected from the hordes of applicants to this program. And being around so many high-caliber people makes you step it up one more notch just so you can keep up, and hang with the cool kids.

Dinner is held, family-style, as you all sit around or next to each other to encourage and promote community and conversation. You can't remember being this hungry before, having burned every calorie plus some that you put in your body earlier in the day. As you eat, you begin to reflect on the discussion prompted by your Crew Leader at lunch, talking about the qualities of a good leader – a discussion he prompted, but as a crew, you took up the mantle and turned it into a productive conversation, distilling traits of good and bad leaders into short and tidy phrases – a good leader uses power wisely, a good leader communicates effectively, and the countless others that were arrived at. You wonder which traits you embody, and which ones could use a little more work. Your daze is broken by the “Happy Spoon”.

After dinner and its associated mess has been expunged from your camp, it's time to assemble to talk about Leadership Dynamics and how they pertain to working with youth. The theme of the lesson this evening is “Risk Assessment in the Woods”. You grab your notebook from your tent, rub your belly in satisfaction, and whip out your camp chair to nestle in next to the log in the kitchen area. The outdoors are your classroom, and you embrace it warmly and acceptingly.

The lessons are over for the day. You want to read. You want to write that letter home. But you are so tired... it's lights out for you. And sleep will come easy from so a hard day.

You may have noticed, in this typical LDP day, there was very little free time. That is because LDP is designed so that it pushes your limits. It makes you reach for that next level of excellence. It encouraged you to become selfless, while learning all the while about group dynamics, and many different facets of leadership that can be taught. But, as you may have surmised by now, not all leadership can be taught. And this is where LDP really shines. As the program progresses through your training phase, you, as a participant, will gradually take the reigns from your crew leader until you are making the decisions for the crew. Nothing like learning while doing! Learning will be through peer-offered feedback sessions, offered on a near-daily basis.

In the end, you become an instrument of empowerment. You will be a facilitator. You will work with youth in the outdoors, and open doors out of the typical societal

constructs that they are used to, helping them uncover who they really are, and really can be. It's quite special, I assure you.

Going back to my experience in LDP, it was possibly the hardest thing I have ever done. On many levels. And that's coming from someone who has hiked every step of the Appalachian Trail (2150+ miles). From my LDP experience, I have gained a new perspective on my life. And it has helped give me direction. For that, I am eternally grateful. I also got some sweet new muscles, and can make one helluva beautiful trail!

Many folks ask for more specific benefits or things I have learned while being a participant in LDP, instead of vague "new perspectives and directions", so I have developed something of a list. I gained efficient time management skills. I learned how to manage a crew on the worksite. My communication skills improved dramatically (remember communicating is active AND passive, folks). My familiarity and comfort with tools increased greatly, especially with chainsaws. I learned about conservation perspectives which I was and still am able to apply to my surroundings and daily activities out doors ("Look how that water has puddle up on the trail! I can fix that!" while smugly pointing and impressing others). What I really meant by the last one was that I developed a greater understanding how recreation affects the outdoors and how management of it is deep water continually tread by our land managers. I improved many technical skills and knowledge of trail structures and features. I was given the opportunity to travel to unique and beautiful areas of our public lands, to live and work there for weeks at a time. The leadership skills that I learned have been able to be applied to many different areas of my life since my LDP experience. This program also fostered ecological themes and education. It also taught me risk management in wilderness and urban settings. I became aware of the biodiversity in the Pacific Northwest. I also gained a broader understanding of governmental agencies (especially how different land management agencies operate). I learned how to be positive in the face of VERY challenging things and setbacks. I learned, perhaps most importantly, how to challenge not only myself, but how to challenge others.

This is not the limit of the benefits you may receive from the program, nor is it necessarily a list of ones you will receive. As I mentioned previously, the LDP experience is a little different for everyone based on what they bring to the table, what their teammates bring, their leader, and their projects will all create one unique experience that is sure to affect you in one way or another. LDP is a powerfully subjective experience.

There is one thing that I can assure that you will receive as an added benefit. And that is being part of the NYC community. I have never worked with so many folks of this high caliber. The sheer amount of integrity and kindness and competence and cheerfulness I've encountered with the staff at NYC is truly inspirational, and it is a very close community. These are people dedicated to helping others. I thought it to be inspirational to be around and working with these people.

There's no telling where you may go from being a successful graduate of LDP. Obviously you'll get the sweet AmeriCorps deal (possibly the best one in the whole country), but you'll also gain so many intangible things as well. I've known people to go work with the Forest Service afterwards. Or various city/county/state parks. Also LDP gave some valuable experience for wilderness therapy programs or teaching in traditional or non-traditional settings. I've also known many to continue on to go get their Master's Degree. Many LDPers continue on to work as NYC staff.

My LDP experience took me to parts of Washington, Oregon, and Idaho, and as a non-native to the Northwest, it was an amazing introduction to the splendor this region holds. I still live here today. And I still work with NYC. Having started in LDP, I became a Crew Leader, and now am a Program Coordinator. They call me Woods Boss. I like that.

Carry on.

-El Capitan, LDP3, 2005