Northwest Youth Corps program empowers LGBTQ teens to celebrate their identities while gaining life and job skills serving at local National Parks
October 11th is National Coming Out Day, an annual LGBTQ awareness day to support LGBTQ people in "coming out of the closet." While this great day of support and solidarity for the LGBTQ community helps many teenagers feel empowered to "come out," there can be a very difficult period afterwards where young people struggle to navigate the new challenges this transition brings.

The non-profit Northwest Youth Corps (NYC), running youth development/conservation service programs since 1984, witnessed firsthand how LGBTQ youth often have many obstacles to overcome after they "come out," whether involving family, losing friends, or not knowing how to deal with new situations. NYC's move to create Rainbow Crews - serving teens identifying as LGBTQ+ - began when they recognized the need to be much more purposeful in supporting this community and wanted to help these young teenagers be better prepared to navigate their lives ahead.

In 2020, with support from the National Park Foundation and REI, NYC was able to offer two Rainbow Crew sessions this past summer in partnership with the National Park Service. With strict COVID-19 safety protocols in place these crews successfully completed important conservation work partnering with Mount Rainier National Park, Ebey's Landing National Historical Preserve, and Lewis and Clark National Historical Park. These local National Parks have been huge supporters of the Rainbow Crews and exemplify their commitment in striving to be a place where people from all backgrounds feel both welcomed and represented.

In 2016, with help from OUT There Adventures, an outdoor education organization designed to specifically help meet the needs of LGBTQ young people, and funding from the National Park Foundation, who were excited to support this new diversity, equity, and inclusion initiative, NYC created the first single identity LGBTQ conservation crew. The program offers a paid service-learning experience comprised of crewmembers serving 5 weeks with partnering National Parks, working on park maintenance and habitat restoration projects for 6-8 hours a day with daily education and life skills lessons afterwards, allowing participants to also earn high school credit. Most importantly, the Rainbow Crew provides a space for young people to be themselves, share stories and discuss common challenges.

"The National Park Service has been charged with helping to preserve and tell all of America's stories. This includes the ongoing struggle to recognize LGBTQ heritage as embodied in places like Stonewall Inn National Monument," said Chip Jenkins, Superintendent of Mount Rainier National Park.

"When I joined the first Northwest Youth Corps LGBTQ crew at sixteen, I was forever changed by the sense of belonging and support that I felt, for the first time in my life, as a queer person, from queer people," said a Leader-In-Training from session-two of the summer 2019 season. This same young person credits his Rainbow Crew experience for giving him the confidence and skills to be successful on a wilderness crew, and for his new-found desire to be a professional firefighter.

As the parent of one Rainbow Crew participant said, "Y'all are building more than trails and footbridges, y'all are building confidence and strength in our kids who are at highest risk."
The award-winning Rainbow Crew (The Corps Network’s 2020 Project of the Year - corpsnetwork.org) is being funded through the generous support of the National Park Foundation and REI with additional support from the Dawkins Charitable Trust. Learn more about the Rainbow Crew at www.nwyouthcorps.org

About the Northwest Youth Corps
Northwest Youth Corps was created in 1984 to offer teenagers an education-based, work experience modeled after the historic Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930's.

Our core purpose is to provide opportunities for youth and young adults to learn, grow, and experience success. Our programs focus on education, challenge, community, leadership and empowerment, giving youth critical life skills and confidence. Youth leave Northwest Youth Corps knowing that they can overcome obstacles, solve problems, make friends, and attain their objectives in life.

Northwest Youth Corps serves over 1,000 youth annually in Washington, Oregon, Idaho and California. Learn more at https://www.nwyouthcorps.org

Courtesy of Northwest Youth Corps

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