

Hard-of-hearing teen crew completes work on Whidbey trail

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Crew leader Sachiko Flores (right) explains how to build a trail to deaf members of the Northwest Youth Corps at Ebey's Landing National Historical Reserve. Youth crew members Niko (center), Drew and Bryson spent the week with other deaf crew building a new trail into a loop. (Andy Bronson / The Herald)



A new trail for hikers, built by a youth crew, will open next month at Ebey's Landing on Whidbey Island. The nine workers were just like any other hard-working trail crew except one aspect — they were all deaf or hard-of-hearing teenagers.

The crew — known as the Northwest Youth Corps ASL inclusion conservation crew — is part of a program to encourage diversity and to help young deaf people get work experience. The workers are paid for their time and receive educational credits. They were led by two crew leaders — one deaf, one hearing — and were joined by an intern studying American Sign Language.

The new section of trail — a little over a mile — was an impressive accomplishment for any crew. They took the trail from nothing to nearly finished in less than two weeks. Just a few remaining details, including signage, are needed before the trail opens Aug. 25. The trail ribbon-cutting will be part of a celebration for the centennial of the National Park Service.

“It's a beautiful trail, I'm so happy with it,” said Holly Richards, outreach coordinator for Ebey's Landing National Historical Reserve, a partnership of the National Park Service, Washington State Parks, Island County and the town of Coupeville.

The trail, which can be reached from a parking lot at the offices of the Ebey's Landing Trust Board, winds in a loop through the forestland of the Robert Y. Pratt Preserve, which is owned by the Nature Conservancy. Previously, no trail provided access to the forestland. Now the 1.3-mile trail passes through forest and hooks up with the Ebey's Prairie Ridge Trail. All together, it offers a varied view of the area: A bit of forest, a bit of active farmland, a bit of beach and saltwater views.

A new three-quarter mile spur from the northwest side of the loop connects with the Kettles Trail, for bicyclists, horseback riders and walkers, that runs along Highway 20. Thanks to the

spur and the new Pratt Loop, people can now walk from the Kettles Trail all the way to the Bluff Loop Trail, which offers water views and beach access.

Right: Northwest Youth Corps crew leader Cody Reidy signs to his fellow deaf crew members before they break for lunch after trail building at Ebey's Landing National Historical Reserve. Cody Reidy, 28, who is deaf, led the crew of nine youths. About half of the crew had experience working on trails, he said. (Andy Bronson / The Herald)



That experience showed in their work, he said. The crew was able to accomplish a lot in a short amount of time, with some of the more-experienced workers helping the others pick up skills quickly. “Those with experience are boosting their skills,” Reidy said, “and they have improved the whole team’s ability to get things done.”

Arielle, a youth crew member from California, was one of those with previous trail work experience. (For privacy reason, NW Youth Corps doesn’t release the last names of youth workers.) Last year, she worked with a crew that included hearing youths and those who were deaf or hard of hearing. She said communication was challenging in the mixed group and that, this year, she appreciated working with a group where everyone knows sign language. The pace was faster, she said, because of the smoother communication.

Brianna, also from California, agreed. “When we all communicate in one language, it makes it easier,” she said. Brianna learned other things. “It teaches us how to be leaders,” she said. “And how to survive in the woods.”

Reidy said that the youth are gaining skills in trail work, of course, but also skills that can translate into their lives going forward. “I really want to teach the value of hard work in life,” he said. At the same time, trail work also helped the crew learn balance, he said. They learned how to maintain a strong work ethic, but not overdo it and exhaust themselves.

Reidy served as a mentor and model for the crew. “They’re able to see how I interact with the employer,” he said. “I can show the crew how we can work together.” He can also help them understand their deaf rights, such as the rights to have an interpreter.

The crew spent five weeks together. After leaving Ebey’s Landing, they headed to Olympic National Park, where they did both frontcountry and backcountry work. They finished up with a stint in the North Cascades. Saturday, the crew gathered to celebrate graduation of their summer program with four other crews who were around Washington. Those crews were made up of hearing youth. Another crew of deaf youth will do five additional weeks of work around the area this summer. Crews of deaf young adults are also doing some work in the state, including in the San Juan Islands.

Jay Satz, senior director of partnership and innovation for Northwest Youth Corps, said the deaf crews are part of an important effort to get more diversity in the conservation movement. He says it's important to make the movement more reflective of all of America. He hopes the youth who work on the crews gain appreciation for America's public lands while also gaining life and job skills. Those job skills are particularly important, he said, because unemployment among the nation's deaf or hard of hearing community is much higher than the hearing population.

During the crews' time on the job, park employees shared their experiences working for the parks. Satz said it was a valuable chance for them to see what options were available for jobs related to the experience they were gaining.

Satz said the program will continue in coming years — particularly because of strong support from the NPS Youth Office. This is the second year youth corps has had crews entirely of deaf or hard of hearing workers. It's the first year they've worked with the National Parks Service, and Satz is excited for that partnership to continue.

Roy Zipp, operations manager for Ebey's Landing National Historical Reserve, said he appreciated the crew's work. "The youth team was extremely well organized, motivated and highly productive," he wrote in an email. "We were able to accomplish a key Centennial project, and this would not have happened without NWYC. The team's deafness added a unique dynamic that demonstrated diversity involves not only race and ethnicity, but also people with disabilities. "In this instance, their deafness was not a disability, but instead an asset that enabled a deeper and richer understanding of the unique aspects of non-verbal communication for everyone involved."

Emma Bixler, a professional interpreter who worked with the crew at Ebey's Landing and their other sites, helped get the program started for the Northwest Youth Corps. She previously worked with the Minnesota Conservation Corp on a similar program. In 2013, she started working with the Youth Corps and last year she was the inclusion coordinator.

She's worked with a number of crews, both hearing and deaf, and said she's seen the youth come in unsure and leave having gained confidence and discovered a new interest that they didn't realize they were passionate about.

Arielle said she appreciated the chance to spend time with, and learn how to work with, people from different backgrounds from all over the country. "Deaf people can do anything but hear," she said.



Right: Northwest Youth Corps members Niko and Drew level the trail using grubber tools at Ebey's Landing National Historical Preserve in June. The two were part of an all-deaf crew making news trails at the park. (Andy Bronson / The Herald)