

MARIN CONSERVATION CORPS

AFTER 25 YEARS, A GOOD IDEA STILL HELPS THE GREAT OUTDOORS



IJ photos/Jeff Vendsel

Juan Carlos Sanchez (front) and Eduardo Zamora carry a tarp filled with debris collected from the Corte Madera Creek channel in Ross as the Marin Conservation Corps on Thursday removed debris in preparation for flood season.

Trailblazing nonprofit marks silver anniversary

By Jim Staats
Marin Independent Journal

AN ENTERPRISING FATHER had a bright idea while jogging on a Marin Headlands trail 25 years ago.

Why not launch a Marin Conservation Corps to help train youth and provide jobs cleaning up the environment?

But corps founder Richard Hammond's idea didn't take shape until after the devastating floods of 1982, when officials saw the value of a local youth corps that could spring into action.

"He was also thinking of his teenage sons that needed something productive to do over the summer," said Marilee Eckert, executive director. "Once the floods happened, he really got the ear of county supervisors.

"People could really see how there would be a big advantage to having a local corps here able to help, not just respond (to natural disasters), but do some work to help them from happening in the first place."

A celebration recognizing the organization's

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Pedro Perez cleans out one of the fish rests along the Corte Madera Creek channel with the Marin Conservation Corps.

AT A GLANCE

- ▶ **History:** The first nonprofit conservation corps in the nation, established in 1982
- ▶ **Headquarters:** 27 Larkspur St., San Rafael
- ▶ **Annual budget:** \$5 million
- ▶ **Staff:** 116 employees, consisting of 84 corps members and 32 professional staffers. Some students join staff seasonally as part of Project ReGeneration program.

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The agency's 25th anniversary will be celebrated with an open house at its Novato office, 5 to 8:30 p.m. Thursday at 11 Pimentel Court in Bel Marin Keys, Novato. The celebration will include entertainment and exhibits. For more information, call 454-4554.

CORPS: Marin conservation group marks 25 years of service

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25 years of service including natural resource management, job skills development and employment training for youth and young adults will be Thursday evening at the agency's Novato office.

A schedule of work by corps members in projects such as hillside vegetation management, habitat restoration, flood prevention and school recycling programs includes an educational component each Friday that helps members get high school diplomas, college education and environmental training.

The corps, through an association with AmeriCorps, established a summer youth program in 1994 that involves 140 middle and high school students in community service, environmental education and recreational activities.

Hammond, now a Berkeley-

based environmental attorney who sits on the agency's board of directors, said the group's evolution "has been far more than I could have envisioned early on.

"It was a great honor to round up the initial group of people to make it happen," said Hammond, who worked with the California Conservation Corps in his role as deputy secretary for the state Resources Agency as part of Gov. Jerry Brown's administration in the late 1970s. "It's been a great success through the efforts of many, many people other than myself."

Though Hammond admitted with a chuckle that his sons never did become too involved with the corps, others have benefited.

Berkeley resident Hannah Sarvasy, a natural resources crew supervisor, was overseeing 11 corps members clearing debris and removing invasive

plants on various sections of Corte Madera Creek last week as part of a flood prevention and habitat enhancement project.

She said the project is a small part of agency maintenance on more than 30 miles of Marin creeks.

Sarvasy, 25, said the county's open space grabbed her attention.

"I was attracted to Marin corps because of the amazing amount of open space and quality of open space that Marin has," she said.

"I think it is an amazing thing when a crew goes into a neighborhood and interacts with neighbors and each other," she said. "It's really important for local youth to gain the experience of working hard in the community, physically on the land."

Eckert said the agency is not only saving the planet but "we're saving lives here too,"

noting members often use the corps as a springboard to better lives.

It only took three months of involvement for 21-year-old Marin City native Matthew Rainey, on Sarvasy's crew, to turn his life around.

"I just got out of jail and, because I'm a convicted felon, I didn't have an opportunity to work anywhere else," he said. "Honestly, I was living in my car, didn't have anything going for myself but every single day I would come to work."

Rainey saved enough to rent an apartment in Richmond, earn his GED and has taken an interest in a trade through the corps.

"A lot of stuff I wouldn't have learned without this," he said.

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