



FREDERIC LARSON / The Chronicle

Rochelle Adams directs her Marin Conservation Corps crew (from left) Deangelo Benjamin, 14; Ryan Lee, 15; and Scott Dicarilo, 14.

## Corps values turn a life around

By Ulysses Torassa  
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Rochelle Adams today is an energetic, upbeat member of the Marin Conservation Corps' young staff, planning a college career and hoping someday to become an obstetrician or a teacher.

It's a far cry from her teenage years spent in foster homes, group homes and in less-than-ideal family settings, when she ran away, sold drugs and attempted suicide.

Her journey from delinquency and despair to dedication is part of a documentary being filmed about the Civilian Conservation Corps, a movement begun during the Great Depression that engages young people in full-time community service, training and educational activities, much of it outdoors.

"Rochelle's taken practically every opportunity here that she could," said Marilee Eckert, executive director of the Marin Conservation Corps, explaining why the local group nominated Adams, 23, to be featured in the yet-to-be-titled documentary, part of the PBS series "Voices of Vision." The program highlights Adams and others who have used the corps to improve their lives.

"Voices of Vision" profiles people and organizations making an impact on issues as diverse as hu-

man rights, childhood cancer and preserving the environment. The series is produced by Teaching Learning Network. As of press time, the segment featuring Adams was scheduled to run in early 2006.

"She hasn't had an easy background," Eckert said. "She's had a lot of problems in her life and a lot of struggles. But she came to our corps, she got into the high school diploma program and worked really hard in that . . . she was in our AmeriCorps program, so she got scholarships," said Eckert, referring to the network of state and national service programs that connects individuals with nonprofits and public agencies to serve individuals and communities. ". . . She approaches things with so much enthusiasm and energy, the staff really recognizes how hard she worked on herself."

Adams agrees her life has turned around dramatically over the years, and she gives much of the credit to Dawn Sommers, who was paired with Adams, then 11, through the Big Brothers Big Sisters program. Sommers, a retired air traffic controller from Fremont, has stuck with Adams through thick and thin, encouraging her, teaching her about life and setting clear expectations for her.

"I know if she weren't by my

side, I would not be the person I am today," said Adams, who lives in Richmond.

Adams first went into foster care at age 2. By age 10, she was so depressed she began running away and attempted suicide several times, leaving her foster mother in Vallejo little choice but to send her to a group home that had 24-hour supervision.

At Rubicon Children's Center in Fremont, Adams was paired with Sommers, who kept tabs on schoolwork, disciplinary problems at school and attitude.

"If I was acting up, they (Rubicon) would call her and she would come and get me," Adams said. "If I got suspended, Dawn would call me: 'I heard you got suspended? What's up with that?' When my grades came in, she'd call up: 'Why did you get that F?' If I didn't do this, I'd realize, 'Dawn's going to get on me' and when I did it, it was like, 'This is cool.'"

Sommers linked rewards like fun activities to specific behaviors and accomplishments for Adams to achieve, she said. And she helped her set goals — like a new boom box or a team jacket — and plan a strategy for how to reach it.

"She finally had someone keep her accountable," Sommers said. "I'd say, 'You have a choice: if you're going to do that, you're not going to do this.' It was amazing to

see her start changing."

Adams said Sommers' loving and consistent approach was exactly what she needed.

"She gave me a sense of direction, and how to go about things," Adams said. "She's not afraid to give it to you straight-up but also be sensitive to your feelings."

After leaving school, Adams worked different jobs before learning from her boyfriend about the Conservation Corps, where he was getting his high school diploma. "I was always looking for a job outdoors," she said. "And he knew I always watched nature shows on TV."

As part of a work team, Adams has pulled weeds and invasive species, built trails and helped in recycling efforts. This summer she led a group of middle school kids in an outdoor education program put on by MCC.

She also studied for, and received, her high school diploma and is attending College of Marin.

Sommers said it is gratifying to see how well Adams is doing. While college will be a challenge, Sommers said, "I don't think she'll let things stand in her way."

"She's taken responsibility for her life no matter what life has given her. I'm so proud of her."

E-mail Ulysses Torassa at [utorassa@schronicle.com](mailto:utorassa@schronicle.com).