



TIMBER! Frank Zanco (left) and Curtis Smith clear wood on San Rafael ridge
IJ photos/Martin E. Klimke



WHAT A BUZZ: J.P. Jonesku, 21, now a staff supervisor, came to the corps for a couple months and decided this was a great place to stay

More to the Corps than conservation

Marin group offers job skills, education

By Maura Thurman

Independent Journal reporter

When Guillermo Aban arrived in Marin County about two years ago, all he knew about felling trees was what he saw in his native Mexico.

"They cut trees all around and no one talked about conservation," says Aban, 20, of San Rafael. "Before I came here, I didn't care about conservation. Now I think it's important for everyone."

Such is the influence of the Marin Conservation Corps, where Aban receives job along with 56 other young men and women.

Aban hopes eventually to join 4,000 others who have "graduated" from the corps over the past 10 years, maybe moving on to a new job in horticulture or landscaping. "I like plants," he says.

He will pursue his goals with marketable skills learned in the corps over the past year. Aban now handles a chainsaw with confidence and says tree-felling is among favorite jobs. In November, he was Corps Member of the Month.

"I feel like I'm not wasting my time here. I don't feel like I have to work — I want to work," Aban says, smiling in a chill breeze as he takes a break from thinning eucalyptus trees on a San Rafael ridge.

Youths wasting time was the impetus behind the corps, which was founded in 1982 and modeled after the government-financed California Conservation Corps. At the time, it was the first local non-profit corps in the country.

"I was concerned about Marin youth having the opportunity to do work with a clear purpose and a chance to learn some things," says attorney Richard Hammond of Mill Valley, one of the corps' prime sculptors.

A deputy secretary in the state Department of Resources in the late 1970s, he saw government agencies in need of a low-cost way to build trails, clear brush and do other outdoor chores.

About 100 teens participated in the first corps, a seven-week summer program.

"When you have young kids for a limited amount of time, you can't provide as high a level of service," says Hammond, now a lawyer for Heller, Ehrman, White & McAuliffe in San Francisco and still a corps director.

Shifting focus to provide more training and year-round work for young adults aged 18 to 26 was "a critical adjustment," Hammond says. "Now we can offer year-round service of greater quality and we serve people who are really ready to take advantage of our programs."

Corps clients have mirrored changes in Marin. Laotian and Vietnamese immigrants were a large part of the early corps, while today's group is about half Latino. "It's been a challenge to adapt," he says.

There have been other challenges along the way. Funds fell short, complaints surfaced about work quality. "We really got a

Corps' legacy

Marin Conservation Corps has contributed to outdoor projects in almost every corner of the county. Among its prominent works:

- A 5.5-mile trail at China Camp State Park near San Rafael.
- Benches and fences at Muir Woods National Monument.
- A new flood-control levee along Gallinas Creek in Santa Venetia.
- Fish habitat made of old tires at Phoenix Lake.
- Playground renovation at the Marin City public housing complex on Drake Avenue.

"I feel like I'm not wasting my time here."

— Guillermo Aban, Corps worker

dose of institutional reality," Hammond says.

But reality is friendly now. The annual budget now amounts to \$1.6 million: 22 percent from Marin Community Foundation, 67 percent from fees for service and the rest from other grants. Clients, many with annual contracts, range from the county flood control office to local homeowner groups and the Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

Education programs have become integral to the corps. While workers earn \$6 to \$9 per hour for 32 hours weekly, they also must attend Friday classes in subjects that include English, job-hunting skills and computers.

While some corps members haven't finished high school, others come to focus career goals they formed in college. They must make progress because they can't stay more than two years.

"I was thinking about becoming a park ranger, but I wanted a year off from school," says J.P. Jonesku, 21, now a staff supervisor for one of the five corps crews. "I came here for a couple of months and decided this was a great place to stay."

She most enjoys teaching skills to new corps members, such as using hand tools or a chainsaw. "You're helping to get people where they want to go," she says.

Of course there are hardships for corps members, like poison oak and low pay, Jonesku says. Or working on a tree-trimming project on a rainy day in December.

But John Aranson, a former corps member who now supervises trail-building for the Marin County Open Space District, stresses the rewards.

"In the spring, when everyone else is inside," he says, "we're out enjoying the green grass."