

Seniors dig Marin Conservation Corps

Crews landscape, do chores for the elderly

By Ingrid Becker

Independent Journal reporter

The hardy young people of the Marin Conservation Corps spend most work days getting close to nature — building trails, planting trees, repairing wildlife habitat or digging fence holes.

But twice a week, the work crews bring shovels and hoes into the urban landscape and lend a helping hand to older Marin residents.

Clearing overgrown yards is their specialty, but corps members also have painted walls and planted petunias to brighten the homes and yards of sick, poor, disabled or just plain lonely seniors.

"It's like winning the lottery when they say, 'what did I do to deserve this,'" said Janet "Boog" Bookey, the coordinator and crew leader for the Marin Conservation Corps Elder Service Project.

Bunnye Wengren, 75, was delighted with the job four corps members did. Under Bookey's supervision, four corps members recently washed and painted the walls inside Wengren's Novato trailer home and substituted two tons of decorative rock for the tangle of prickly weeds in the small front yard where the woman's sole companion, a poodle, exercises.

Wengren, who is disabled, said she had no one else to help her with the work.

"I'm so thrilled about it," she said. "If anybody needed help, I did."

Alice Perry was also grateful for the job corps members did removing a dead tree and other fire hazards from around her home.

"I appreciated the directness with which they applied themselves to the job," she said.

The Elder Service Project, which began



HELPING HANDS: Fernando Montenegro (left) and Gil-dardo Azueta paint the ceiling at Bunnye Wengren's mobile home in Novato. They are with the Marin Conservation Corps Elder Service Project.

IJ photo/Scott Henry

in 1987 as a pilot program, has served about 100 senior citizens at their residences.

The goal is to assist seniors living independently. Emphasis is placed on removing or repairing dangerous conditions.

The services of the corps members are free. However, the seniors are asked to help pay for materials whenever possible.

The program is financed by the Koret Foundation and several other foundations, Marin businesses, clubs and individuals.

"They make it very simple for the senior," said Kathy Desilets, a resource specialist with the Marin Independent Elders Project, one of several social service agencies that refers clients to the corps' program.

"The seniors receive more personal at-

tention from this program and they appreciate that as well as the service they receive," she said.

On a break from shoveling rock at Wengren's trailer home, corps members said they too get something out of helping the elderly.

"This is gratifying when you see the individual's reaction," said Jill Mariani, 20, of San Rafael.

With its small budget — \$50,000 in grant money for this year — the Elder Service Project can only operate two days a week. However, Bookey and other corps leaders said the demand for their services is far greater.

"The downside is there are a lot more seniors than we can take care of," said Pat Dever, development officer for the corps.

How to sign up

The Elder Service Project operates on a referral only basis. To qualify, seniors must contact a Marin social service agency to determine eligibility and to arrange a contact with the Marin Conservation Corps.

The agencies include:

- Marin Independent Elders Project, 897-1297.
- The Marin Senior Coordinating Council, 456-9062.
- Canal Community Alliance, 454-2640.
- Marin Center For Independent Living, 459-6245.