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Harnessing Teen Energy

Youth Volunteer Corps helping to meet community needs, provide leadership training since 1993

By Rayne Wolfe, Press Democrat



Anastasia Pogadaev, a senior at Santa Rosa High School and a member of the Youth Volunteer Corps, will be working at the Laguna Learning Center to plant a 600-foot-long hedgerow at the Laguna de Santa Rosa.

The Sonoma County Volunteer Center, the place that matches willing volunteers with the nonprofit organizations that need them, has a secret weapon.

It's called the Youth Volunteer Corps.

Founded in 1993, it trains students to identify community volunteering needs and draw up plans to address them. It also allows a group of student leaders to show other young volunteers how a tiny group can make a big difference.

"It's something social. It's productive and it's really educational," said Anastasia Pogadaev, an 18-year-old Santa Rosa High School senior.

Youth Volunteer Corps gives students an opportunity to serve all year, participating in a wide range of monthly projects, from beach cleanups to home repairs for people in need.

"I've learned so much at the Volunteer Center. We go out and see how things work in Sonoma County. We look at things like homeless issues. It makes me want to do more and to become more aware," Pogadaev said. A passionate choir student for all four years at Santa Rosa High, she says her stage presence helps her lead others.

Her next project is the National Youth Service Day on Saturday, which is also Earth Day. Partnering with the adult volunteers and docents at the Laguna de Santa Rosa, Pogadaev

will help harness teen energy to plant a 600-foot-long hedgerow near the site of the future Laguna Learning Center.

"The Youth Volunteer Corps has helped us for about five years and we really depend on them to tackle big, physical projects," said Mary Abbott, education coordinator at the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation.

"They work rain or shine. It is just the greatest help to us," Abbott said.

Saturday's effort is part of a larger plan to create permanent office and learning center space that will allow visitors and volunteers to better share the Laguna's treasures of flora and fauna habitats.

For Asher Miller, the Youth Volunteer Corps coordinator at the Volunteer Center, National Youth Service Day will be another opportunity to show young volunteers that they can transform their own communities.

"This is a leadership program really. We let the teens run the show. They come away from projects knowing that they have tools to identify, plan and have a successful project. At the end of the day, they should feel like they've really done something," Miller said.

About 400 teens work through the program

in a typical year. About 20 are invited to participate in additional leadership programs.

For Pogadaev, it's a time to test herself.

"It's funny, sometimes it's really hard to convince friends to sign up for projects. People want their Saturdays to themselves," she said. "But I've learned that if I can just get them to come to one event, they'll usually come to another," she said.

To learn more, visit www.volunteernow.org/youth or call the Volunteer Center at 573-3399. To learn more about National Youth Service Day, visit Youth Service America at www.ysa.org. The Laguna de Santa Rosa Web site is www.lagunadesantarosa.org.