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Conservation volunteers get hands dirty cleaning up environment

By [Samantha Liss](#) • June 30, 2009 @ 2:30 PM
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Matthew Ellenwood spent part of last Friday at [Pride Fest](#), digging through garbage bins and picking out items for recycling.

With the help of other volunteers and friends, he collected 500 pounds of recyclables.

“Some people would say thank you for doing this,” Ellenwood says. Others would mindlessly throw cups and garbage in the bins as volunteers were working.

Though the work isn't glamorous, Ellenwood says, it has a real impact on the environment. That's the main goal at the [Chicago Conservation Corps](#), a group that provided training and resources to Ellenwood.

The city's [Department of Environment](#) launched the program three years ago in an effort to build and foster an environmental community in Chicago.

“There was an interest and a need for some sort of training program and assistance for residents to get out and do environmental service projects in their community,” says project coordinator Samantha Mattone. “There is obviously an increasing interest in the environment's well being.”

The program offers a series of four classes held on Saturdays. The four-hour class address issues including land use, air quality, energy conservation, water and community organizing.

The end goal is for participants to work on their own community projects involving the environment.

After graduating, Corps volunteer Suzanne Meyering began working on a project with the Alliance for the Great Lakes. She helps clean up Green Leaf Beach at Loyola Park, as part of the adopt-a-beach program.

The Corps “inspired me to take a look at what I could do personally,” says Meyering. “The bottom line of all that is that I care about the future of Lake Michigan.”

Last weekend, Ellenwood set up a booth at the Pride Fest to talk with festival-goers about the importance of conservation.

Ellenwood says his environmental knowledge and the ability to teach others come from the Corps training.

He plans to continue working with organizers of festivals across the city to encourage recycling.

Mattone says the Corps is growing in popularity, and received twice as many applications as it had spots for the most recent program. She adds that word of mouth seems to be the most effective way at recruiting people. Once participants start program they stick around.

“We’re seeing our participants come back and do second and third projects,” says Mattone.

Susan Casey is one of them. She completed two projects -- an effort to educate people on the problems associated with commercial cleaning products, and a program at her daughter’s school raising awareness about idling cars.

“I worked with 7th grade science class and we surveyed the level of idling going on at dismissal time and we figured out the amount of fuel consumed and green house gases produced,” says Casey.

Casey says the Corps provided a \$400 stipend so she could create signs to raise awareness about the consequences of idling.

“I’m really interested in doing things on behalf of the environment and climate change and it’s something I’ve cared about for a really long time,” says Casey.

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