

This journey began with the 2013 publication of the Three Mile Creek WMP and a grant from the New York Community Trust to the Mobile Bay, New York New Jersey Harbor, and San Juan Bay NEPs to do community engagement. One of our deliverables was a MLK Avenue Leadership Academy, where “emerging and reluctant leaders from the lower TMC Watershed recognized the need for area young adults to become more connected with environmental assets and suggested seeking opportunities to combine local environmental education with employment opportunities. The idea for a youth conservation corps was born.

We secured \$250K from National Fish and Wildlife Foundation’s Creating the Next Generation of Conservationists. We partnered with the MLK Redevelopment Corporation and the Student Conservation Association with funding from Alabama Power Foundation, Crampton Trust, and local elected officials with a goal to connect young adults from a highly urbanized area of the City of Mobile to their surrounding environment through education, training, and employment in the lower TMC Watershed.

This area is home to a population that’s 85% African American with 40% of households living in poverty. It contains large tracts of wooded wetlands, an abandoned landfill and a tributary that carries runoff from the urban center of the city. It’s a low-lying area subjected to frequent flooding that bears the disproportionate brunt of impacts of upstream nonpoint source pollution and is extremely vulnerable to the impact of climate change. Our goals including:

- Providing on the job environmental management training to 10 1t-risk, 18-to-25-year-olds with preference to residents of the lower watershed.
- Provide environmental management employment to 10 Corps members for a six-month period.
- Implementing at least two restoration activities recommended in the TMC WMP, including invasive plant control and effecting drainage improvements in the lower watershed.
- Conducting at least five community education events coordinated and delivered by Corps members.

Two trained SCA Team Leaders showed up in mid-January, and 10 Corps members recruited by MLKARC and screened by the SCA reported on February 3 for an extensive nine-day training session in north Florida where members were trained in Wilderness First Aid and CPR, Chainsaw certification, wildland firefighting and prescribed fire, Canoe safety training and herbicide safety training.

Corps members arrived at work at 8 am and travelled to work areas in rented trucks or canoes. Members were paid \$10/hour for a forty-hour work week that included four days of WMP implementation and one day of professional and technical training and soft skill development. They received health benefits and, as AmeriCorps members, were assured a \$2,00 educational allowance at the conclusion of the term.

Their primary task was control of invasive species in the wooded wetlands, and here are their three principal targets: Chinese tallow or popcorn trees, Chinese privet, and taro. They eradicated 8,000 popcorn trees and 14,000 privet plants from 39 acres of wetlands and riparian uplands.

They used chainsaws, hand saws, loppers, shovels, and herbicide to clear over 1,000 feet of blocked drainage conveyances. The Corps has maintained stream restoration sites, assisted the City of Mobile with drain clearing and post-tropical weather debris removal, and now they're installing rain barrels in low-income flood-prone neighborhoods.

And they made some new friends and got comfortable in new settings.

They were a big hit in sixth grade classrooms with their Watersheds 101 presentation. They produced a televised video quiz program for middle school science classes, and they realized Roberta's vision of creating a Trash Mob, with a catchy hip-hop song and dance that we've all bought into with excitement.

We've achieved most of our goals, but we certainly learned some lessons. Here's a picture of all but one Corps member at the TMC Greenway groundbreaking. Nine in early May. But two members were dismissed after a lover's spat got somewhat physical, another was caught smoking weed on the job, one had attendance problems, two were involved in a bullying incident along with firearm possession, and one just could not get to work on time. At the conclusion of the six-month period, and with more to do and a little funding to support it, we extended the program to make sure our four proven Corps members find gainful employment.

Two obstacles underlied our retention problems.

- 1) Placing inexperienced 22-year-old white team leaders from outside the community in charge of 19 to 26-year-old African American Mobilians is not a formula for success. We found out near the conclusion of the six-month term that SCA has a Community Corps model they use in urban Chicago neighborhoods that should have been employed here.
- 2) An opportunity to match the federal contribution by aligning Corps members with AmeriCorps VISTA made Corps members essentially volunteers and their \$400 per week a stipend, not a salary. Corps members quickly figured out that coming to work an hour late or not showing up at all would only result in a "performance plan," without affecting their paychecks. Again, NOT the formula...

With \$7M awarded to The Nature Conservancy for development of a Gulf Corps, lessons learned in Mobile, AL should be very valuable.