



Heart of Oregon Corps helps kids make their way in the world

By Holly R. Hutchins ♦ Photos courtesy of Heart of Oregon Corps



Following your heart. Racquel Smith, age 18
Do what the heart wants. Hannah Kazel, age 18
Community. Ray Hendricks, age 20

These are personal responses from three young Heart of Oregon Corps members to what the word *heart* in the program's name means to them. All three are current members of AmeriCorps, an integral component of Bend-based Heart of Oregon Corps. Its mission is to inspire and empower positive change in the lives of disadvantaged Central Oregon youth through jobs, education, and stewardship.

From its modest beginning in 2000 with just one crew leader, five youths, and a van, Heart of Oregon Corps (HOC) has evolved into a diversified youth stewardship initiative with six different programs and a \$3 million annual budget, serving more than 300 Central Oregon youth every year. HOC owes its founding to three Ds—Dennis, Dave, and Dan—who together sought to serve a growing number of at-risk youth: the late Dennis Maloney, former director of Deschutes County Juvenile Justice Services; Dave Holmes, retired Deschutes County juvenile parole officer; and Dan Saraceno, retired Sisters School District counselor. Their motivation for using the word *heart*



in the organization's name came from Central Oregon's location in the heart of Oregon and its mission to serve disconnected young people in the heart of the broad Central Oregon community. HOC's extensive service area covers Bend, Redmond, Prineville, Sisters, Culver, Warm Springs, Madras, La Pine, and Crescent.

HOC Executive Director Laura Handy elaborated on the nonprofit's values: "Our youth are transitioning from childhood to adulthood, a pivotal time when they strive to establish self-sufficiency. HOC provides an environment with rigorous physical tasks, high expectations, and strict rules, but we also provide support, mentoring, encouragement, and, yes, even love to our young people as they try to make their way in a world that often lacks it."

She added, "We believe our young people want to work and want to gain an education and serve their community. We strive to provide them meaningful opportunities to do so."

So who are we talking about here? The Opportunity Index, an annual report that provides data on access to opportunity across the United States, defines a disconnected youth as a person between the ages of 16 and 24, not in school and unemployed. The numbers are unsettling: 11.9 percent of Oregon youth are defined as disconnected, which is about the



national average. In Central Oregon, it's even worse: 16.4 percent overall, with Jefferson and Crook Counties both about 20 percent.

"It's a persistent problem," Handy said. "We have been making some small gains in both youth employment and regional graduation rates, especially since the Great Recession. However, youth participation rates in the labor force are still at historically low levels, nationally and regionally."

From its initial partnership nearly 20 years ago with Deschutes County Juvenile Justice, HOC now offers six distinctive avenues for work, education, and community service. All are modeled on the premises of "work, earn, and learn."

AmeriCorps

Aligned with the national AmeriCorps program established by President Clinton in 1993, HOC crews of seven to eight young members work mostly outdoors on natural conservation projects. Terms run three or nine months and members earn a living stipend.

YouthBuild

YouthBuild members make a 12-month daily commitment to work on their GED or high school completion as well as constructing or repairing homes and engaging in leadership development. They earn a small stipend that increases with positive work ethic, attendance, and clean drug tests. YouthBuild is currently constructing an energy-efficient three-bedroom, two-bath, single-family affordable home in Prineville, due for completion in winter 2020. It will be sold by lottery to an eligible family.

Central Oregon Youth Conservation Corps

COYCC is a seasonal summer program in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service. Corps members from across Central Oregon experience eight weeks of environmental conservation work. The program employs more than 90 teens every summer, who earn Deschutes County minimum wage for a four-day week.





Stewardship

HOC members give back to the community through environmental projects such as recycling, litter patrol, fire-free week, and fuels reduction. Their work not only benefits the community but teaches the youth valuable work skills while earning Deschutes County minimum wage.

Thrift Store

HOC operates a thrift store in Madras, primarily staffed by students with disabilities. In addition to learning retail and customer service skills, students also earn Youth Transition Program (YTP) credits for volunteering their time at the store.

Camp LEAD

Standing for leadership, empowerment, advocacy, development, this is another program that focuses on helping youth with disabilities. The week-long immersive leadership camp helps members develop self-advocacy and social skills while giving them work experience in the natural resources industry. Partners include YTP, Oregon Vocational Rehabilitation Services, Oregon State Parks, and the U.S. Forest Service.

So how would HOC's leadership describe some of its recent successes or frustrations? Kara Johnson, YouthBuild program director, described her biggest pleasure as having a young person who has gone through the program return to give her a business card.

"On the flip side," she admitted, "there's the frustration in

knowing that many young persons have the potential to turn their lives around or break the cycle of poverty but simply cannot fully escape their barriers."

Fortunately, many have broken through those barriers and have wonderful, heartwarming success stories to tell.

Youth Build and AmeriCorps graduate Ray Hendricks related how after graduating from YouthBuild, he joined AmeriCorps and completed that program, then found employment for two years.

"But I decided to go to college and then go back to YouthBuild to serve as a full-time AmeriCorps member," he said. "HOC programs have done so much for me that I actually have the logo tattooed on my arm."

Hendricks's ultimate goal is to become a Tesla mechanic.

Racquel Smith, a current AmeriCorps member, recalled that her sister, Cali, an HOC graduate, suggested she try the program to help get her life back on track.

"I was going through a dark place from a bad relationship. Some things happened that broke my heart, and I needed to get out and stop being sad," she said. "I needed to follow my heart, and while it sounds like a cliché, Heart of Oregon Corps helped me follow my heart."

Racquel has been playing cello since she was 13 years old and is thinking about going to a music college next fall. She isn't sure where her path will lead—she was planning on joining the military when she found Heart of Oregon and may still pursue that option following her undergraduate studies—but for now, this is an opportunity she wants to go for, and Heart of Oregon has given her the boost in confidence to take the leap.



"I love playing cello because the beat is like my heart," she shared. "It's pumping for me and makes me so happy."

Another sibling encounter brought Hannah Kazel to the AmeriCorps program. Following her brother's positive HOC experience, Kazel came to the organization through the Northwest Youth Corps program and is now focused on making a career with the U.S. Forest Service.

Corps member Dru Taft is also considering a career in the Forest Service as a wildland firefighter.

"It was suggested I join HOC to get help with education money," he explained, "and now in addition to trying out college, this has given me a lot of tools and experiences I can use."

As the organization prepares for its 20th anniversary in 2020, Handy said that Heart of Oregon Corps will be releasing a new strategic plan in 2021 that is intended to help address the persistent, disappointing numbers of Central Oregon youth who are unemployed or not finishing high school. Rest assured Handy and her Heart of Oregon Corps leadership team will continue to respect the vision of their founders, the "three Ds," that young people are the heart of the community and those from disadvantaged backgrounds deserve a heartfelt chance to work and earn their way to success.

"Youth by youth, crew by crew, Heart of Oregon Corps is giving our Central Oregon young people the chance they need to break through barriers to success, while improving our communities and public lands at the same time," said Handy. "That's enough to make anyone's heart swell." ♦

