



Sammie the mighty tree cutter!



young achievers

Written by Sammie Smith

MY FIRST JOB: PROTECTING OUR FORESTS

A lot of things I planned on doing were put on hold like getting my driver's license, visiting colleges, and generally being 16. Thankfully, one thing that wasn't put on hold was my first job. I learned about Heart of Oregon Corps (HOC) through the Broken Top Community Association social media feed and applied for a summer position working for the Central Oregon Youth Conservation Corps (COYCC), one of six HOC youth programs.

COYCC youth work together with the U.S. Forest Service employees to protect and maintain our local forests. Youth, ages 15-18, participate in a work-earn-learn program that provides an hourly wage for 36 hours of work each week from June to August. I can not think of anything better than getting paid to help protect Oregon's natural resources!

The mission of our work is to improve public lands and keep local communities safer from wildfire. We spent a lot of time during the summer removing ladder fuels from the forests to minimize the impact of wildfires on Deschutes County. Much to my surprise, I found I like and have a talent for cutting down trees that need to

be removed. Another key part of our work is building fencing for Forest Service land leased to local ranchers. Additionally, youth in the COYCC program maintain recreational trails and spaces for mountain biking, hiking, and off-highway vehicles (OHVs).

In order to get work done, team members need to be optimistic and supportive. The work is physically demanding and can be dangerous, so having a team that works well together and respects each other is critical.

No conversation about 2020 would be complete without COVID-19. HOC promotes a safety-first work environment. I found that dealing with the virus in the workplace is doable with the right protocols. Our daily protocol consisted of symptom and temperature checks, a minimum of five hand washes, wearing masks, and frequently sanitizing equipment.

It was a great summer job. I am exceedingly grateful for the opportunity to work with HOC in the COYCC program and with Forest Service staff, especially amidst this pandemic. I've learned a lot about our forests, made a little money, and I am now looking forward to returning next summer. Note to self, remember to apply by May 31!



This year also marks HOC's 20th anniversary of serving youth in Central Oregon. The HOC nonprofit (501c3) has several programs under its umbrella. For more information on HOC programs, employment and to donate, go to <https://heartoforegon.org/>.