

Local students work to restore watershed in Patagonia

By Marion Vendituoli

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Ten Patagonia Union High School students are spending the first part of their summer vacation getting to work at 5 a.m. to move rocks, band hummingbirds, collect and plant native seeds, and hunt for bullfrogs.

They are all working as interns at the Borderlands Earth Care Youth Institute, a program of Borderlands Restoration.

The Borderlands Earth Care Institute is in its second year of operation. The four students who participated last year, Carlos Mingura, Johnny Montanez, Jodie Quiroga and Felix Wharton, have all returned and are serving as group leaders for the six new students who have joined them this year. Joining the four returning interns are Dawn Novack, Annika Coleman, Chani McEldowney, Lexi Mantanez, Jose Vasquez and Danny Miranda.

Last Thursday, the group worked on a water retention project at PUHS. They redesigned 60 feet of a barren slope, terracing the slope and embedding rocks to hold the embankments that they had created to capture rainwater. The newly formed beds will ultimately be planted with native pollinator plants and will serve as an outdoor classroom for the school.

The group gathered in the shade after work to discuss the project and to decide how to complete it after the internship is over. They all agreed that fitting the rocks could be frustrating.

“I hate rocks,” Coleman said when asked how she felt about the work they had been doing.

“I visualize the project done,” Mingura said, “so that pumps me up to get to work and get it done.”

“Working together really helps,” Miranda said.

Caleb Weaver, who is employed by Borderlands Restoration and oversees the interns, asked for ideas for completing the project. The interns suggested a community volunteer day, which they would organize.



Interns

The interns and group leader Caleb Weaver meet after work to discuss their progress on the project.

“I go to school here,” Mingura said. “I’d like to see this finished. It’s going to be a dramatic change.”

Range of experience

The PUHS project is only one of many that the interns have been involved with.

The five-week program started with a hike to the top of Red Mountain so that the students could view the entire watershed that they would be working in. They have spent time at Deep Dirt Farm Institute working on a watershed restoration project; removed invasive plants; worked at the Walking J Farm in Arivaca and at Avalon Farm in Tumacacori learning about sustainable, local agriculture; and chipped in at the Babocomari Ranch in Elgin on erosion control and water retention projects.

They also spent time at the Santa Fe Ranch in Nogales to learn about grasslands and range management, and banded hummingbirds with the Hummingbird Monitoring Network near Patagonia. They will be planting native pollinator seeds at the Borderlands Restoration greenhouse, looking for bullfrogs in a local pond, planting pollinator plants along Harshaw Creek, and collecting native seeds.

Borderlands Earth Care Youth Institute is sponsored by Windsong Peace and Leadership Center, the Walton Family Foundation, GARDEN Inc., and the Patagonia Regional Community Foundation, as well as several individual donors. The program has, until now, been limited to students from Patagonia Union High School, but there are hopes to expand the program to other schools in the area, according to Weaver.

Because of the wide range of hands-on experiences that the interns have been exposed to at the Borderlands Earth Care Youth Institute, Weaver said he feels the program will help them succeed in college and in their careers.

“Not everything is going to touch every student,” he said, “but every student in this group has been touched by at least one of these experiences.”

Weaver said he has been very impressed with the students.

“The goal behind this program was to connect these kids to the watershed, but what I’ve learned is how connected they already were,” he said. “I’m learning from these kids how people who grow up here already are very connected with their natural world.”