

AS TEEN UNEMPLOYMENT SOARS, GROUNDWORK EXPANDS GREEN TEAM

July 18, 2020



Groundwork Hudson Valley Executive Director Brigitte Griswold, center, with staff, on the Science Barge on the Yonkers Riverfront

As teen unemployment rates soar due to the pandemic, Groundwork Hudson Valley is stepping up with the help of its funders to increase how many young people get a paycheck this summer through its award-winning youth program, the Green Team. In a typical year, between 12-15 youth would be hired and the program would include a transformative service trip to Yellowstone National Park after local projects are completed. This year 20 youth have been hired and the Yellowstone excursion is not happening.

“Our youth are truly the life blood of the organization,” says Executive Director Brigitte Griswold, a long-time champion of positive youth development. “And while it is a transformative experience for them,” she says, “the paycheck is also a huge help at home and even more so this year with so many local jobs lost and families in our community turning to food banks and social services.”

With additional funding from The City of Yonkers, The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, The Thomas and Agnes Carvel Foundation, The St. Faiths Foundation, The Environmental Protection Agency, The Westchester County Youth Bureau, and The Fish and Wildlife Service, the organization has been able to both sustain existing youth jobs and open up 5-7 additional positions. The unemployment rate nationally due to the pandemic is highest among young people, the Pew Research Center reported in May using U.S. Labor Department statistics. And among all demographics, Latino and Black workers are the most affected by layoffs. Nearly all of the participants in this program are drawn from Southwest Yonkers, which has a high concentration of Black and Latino families.

While the organization feels fortunate, its ability to carry out community projects at this time is complicated due to Covid-19 restrictions. The staff and youth are adapting, however. The number of youth in the field at any one time is being limited and masks and social distancing are being practiced rigorously. The usual meetings in the downtown Yonkers office to go over projects and engage in a dialogue about environmental issues have moved on-line.

Typically, they conduct community outreach, use tools they have never seen before, camp at

wildlife refuges hundreds of miles away from home, and address conservation issues for wolves, bears and bison at one of America's greatest National Parks. "This is one of the biggest downsides this year," says Victor Medina, the Youth Program Manager at Groundwork, "but personal and community resiliency has been an underlying theme of the program for many years and this is a teachable moment."

The work being carried out in a Covid-safe way this summer includes developing the Yonkers Greenway near the border with Van Cortlandt Park in New York City, promoting local biodiversity by removing acres of invasive plants, and restoring habitat along the Saw Mill River, one of the region's most significant tributaries to the Hudson River. In addition, the Green Team will help grow more produce on the Science Barge, a sustainable farm on the Hudson River, for distribution to local shelters during the pandemic and will help identify heat islands in the community as part of Groundwork's Climate Safe Neighborhoods program. Heat hazards affect many of the same high-risk populations as Covid-19, such as the elderly and those with underlying health conditions.

"The most important thing," says Ms. Griswold, "is that we continue to provide opportunities for these talented young people so they can get jobs that contribute to the local community." She adds, "Our ability to pull this off this year points to the strength of the program, the flexibility of our participants, and the donors who stepped up in a time of crisis. Yellowstone unfortunately, will have to wait till next year for all of us."

Griswold also recently emailed to supporters of Groundwork to highlight the organizations' adaptation to change.

"I am writing to share two of Groundwork's latest efforts to adapt to change: First, while the Science Barge is on PAUSE as a public education center, we are uniquely positioned to address growing issues of food insecurity in Southwest Yonkers. The Science Barge utilizes hydroponic, aeroponic, and aquaponic systems to grow produce faster than soil-based farming. Our growing systems, combined with our unique nutrient cycling system, enable us to quickly grow over an acre of food in a much shorter growing season.

"Instead of growing small numbers of many types of produce for educational purposes, we are changing course to grow fewer varieties at a much larger scale to support increasingly food insecure residents in our community. We will focus on growing organic, pesticide free, high yield varieties of greens, cucumbers, and tomatoes that are increasingly difficult to source locally, responding to a need that Groundwork is uniquely equipped to address. To support growth at scale and extend our growing season into colder months, Groundwork secured a new greenhouse heating system for the Science Barge in 2019.

"Partners on this effort include the YWCA of Yonkers, which provides shelter, meals, and other critically needed wrap around services for up to fifty women each day, and every night. All produce grown on the Science Barge will be donated to the YWCA and other communities in need.

"Second, we are transitioning our sustainability and climate change educational programming, previously delivered through field trips on the Science Barge, into virtual platforms to support our teachers, parents, and caregivers in need of remote learning opportunities for young people.

Please contact our Sustainability Education Manager, Joel Rodriguez, at joel@groundworkhv.org to learn more about these exciting opportunities. There are many!!! We will adapt, change course, and ultimately weather this storm, together," writes Griswold.

This is another worthy, local organization that makes a difference every day. Consider volunteering your time or making a donation. You can help keep them going, and growing, by making a donation to our Resiliency Campaign, or mailing a check to 22 Main Street, Yonkers, NY 10701.

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