

AmeriCorps members gaining real life experience in Tahoe

By Jessie Marchesseau

Each year more than a dozen AmeriCorps members help educate residents and preserve the environment in the Lake Tahoe Basin. They come from all over the country and work for little pay in exchange for valuable work experience.

“I’ve gotten an incredible amount of experience, more than I ever expected to,” said Reyna Yagi, who is serving her second year as an AmeriCorps member. “I’ve probably learned more things than I could ever learn in an entry level position with some other agency.”

Yagi, 24, is a Sierra sustainable communities assistant for the Sierra Nevada Alliance in South Lake Tahoe. She has spent both years of her AmeriCorps service working on the Truckee River Friendly Landscaping Program helping homeowners deal with stormwater and erosion control on their properties. A 2009 graduate of UC Davis, Yagi applied to be an AmeriCorps member after realizing how well some of the available positions tied in with her degree in environmental policy analysis and planning.



SNAP Regional
Coordinator
Allison
Peeler, from

left, and
AmeriCorps
members Reyna
Yagi and Kelly
Miller.
Photos/Jessie
Marchesseau

“I’ve seen it as such a substantial and huge move for me to make after college,” she said, “and I probably couldn’t have made a better decision, to be honest.”

Working alongside Yagi at the Sierra Nevada Alliance is Kelly Miller. Miller, who is originally from South Carolina, began her first year of AmeriCorps service in January. She holds a bachelor’s degree in landscape architecture from Clemson University. However, after working in the industry for a while, Miller realized she was not interested in doing conventional residential landscape design.

Excited about now working for a nonprofit, she says her work with AmeriCorps has given her the opportunity to explore the possibilities of using her degree for projects that are not traditional forms of landscape architecture.

Yagi and Miller are just two of 27 AmeriCorps members who take part in the Sierra Nevada Alliance’s Sierra Nevada AmeriCorps Partnership (SNAP) each year. SNAP places these members with myriad conservation agencies and organizations in the Sierra from Redding to Kernville.

“Without their work, much needed restoration and environmental education wouldn’t be taking place in the basin,” Allison Peeler, SNAP regional coordinator said.

However, SNAP is not the only organization assigning AmeriCorps members to service positions in Lake Tahoe. The Great Basin Institute also sends members to the area, mostly

to fill resource management positions.

But the AmeriCorps members here are only a few of the more than 70,000 people who serve in AmeriCorps each year. Much like a state-side version of the Peace Corps, AmeriCorps was formally launched in 1993 as a means of meeting the country's needs in education, public safety, health and environment. Since then, more than half a million Americans have participated.

Members receive a modest living stipend in place of traditional wages or salaries along with an educational award at the end of their service. While it is a welcome reward, most members choose to participate more for the experience than the compensation.

AmeriCorps member Megan Dee says she believes the best part of AmeriCorps and the Great Basin Institute is they give people like her who are unsure about their future career paths the opportunity to explore a variety of options and find their true passion.

Dee works in the Interpretive Services Department at the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit and has recently discovered an affinity for conservation education. As a Lake Tahoe native, she says the conservation the region's natural environment has always been close to her heart.

But one does not need to be raised here to appreciate the beauty and environmental concerns of the Lake Tahoe Basin. Taylor Currier, 24, hails from San Antonio, Texas. Currier is a second year AmeriCorps member and the first one to work in California Trout's South Lake Tahoe office.



Taylor Currier, 24, is the first AmeriCorps member to work at CalTrout's South Lake office.

"One thing that I love about AmeriCorps is that it's given me the opportunity to just travel to a place that I've always wanted to go and live there for a year," said Currier, who spent his first year of AmeriCorps working in Bellingham, Wash., and chose Tahoe for his second year of service. "These are destinations that I dreamed about in the flat lands of Texas."

Currier credits AmeriCorps for providing him a type of professional experience that a person cannot get in school.

"Every day of the job brings something new that I have to tackle," he said.

While AmeriCorps has experienced budget cuts like so many other federal programs, it has not lost funding entirely.

AmeriCorps Week is coming up – May 14-21 – and Currier and the other Lake Tahoe members will be joining AmeriCorps workers nationwide in an effort to bring more recognition to the program and its benefits to communities.