With the march of populations to cities, low-income and people of color find themselves inside urban areas with limited to non-existing access to nature and the positive benefits for children learning and playing in nature: higher self-esteem, better problem solving skills, better performance in school, higher resiliency, and being healthier physically and mentally. The Texas Parks and Wildlife (TPWD) VISTA Project was created as a bridge builder between the low-income and diverse communities and the natural resources so greatly needed to create a better future for these communities and their children. Within the TPWD VISTA Project, the Franklin Mountains State Park (FMSP) VISTA, Nicole Roque, exemplifies this mission.

Nicole came to the TPWD VISTA Project as a volunteer of FMSP, born and raised in El Paso, Texas. Growing up she would look up from the paved streets to the mountains, painted the colors of the sky by roaming sun and clouds. Inspired by her surroundings, she sought out a greater understanding of the biological world. On her journey, she found her passion for creating wonder and passion for nature within her community. Nicole become a VISTA to share her passion with the low-income communities of El Paso living deprived of access to nature and all its positive impacts.

In creating her vision of wonder Nicole is building a community of allies. Her allies include community organizations found throughout El Paso both large and small, focused and broad in scope. With her partnerships, Nicole is creating opportunities for low-income youth and their communities. These engines for prosperity are recycled art workshops, nature clubs, community schools/hubs, recreational clinics, and service learning activities to name a few. All are focused on interacting with nature and learning about career opportunities and environmental stewardship. For many of the community members, Nicole’s abilities to bring the surrounding nature to their communities which was unfathomable, unreachable to them. Nicole is building the bridge between nature and communities with every opportunity, every interaction, every story told to a thriving future free of the toll of poverty.

All TPWD VISTAs across the state of Texas are driven by their passions and their belief in the mission of the TPWD VISTA Project. They are building bridges unique to their communities and surrounding natural resources. Theses bridges take shape in educational, volunteer, service learning, and veterans and green jobs internship programs, capacity building, and outreach. Each VISTA will move forward in their service and long after with the conviction that every effort, every creation, every project is a step in the direction of eliminating poverty. Texas Parks and Wildlife will continue to support the foundation created by the TPWD VISTA Project, connecting low-income communities to nature and the positive outcomes that come from both interacting together.