

# **A GREEN START TO A NEW LIFE IMMIGRANTS FROM AROUND THE WORLD WORK ON CONSERVATION CORPS PROJECTS IN SAN JOSE.**

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## **Body**

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Imram Hassan and Abdifatah Ahmed didn't know each other in Somalia. But last week, along with immigrants from Vietnam and Mexico, the two worked together protecting the environment in San Jose's Alum Rock Park.

Hassan and Ahmed, both 19, were part of a San Jose Conservation Corps 11- member crew erecting a retaining wall to keep soil from sliding into Penitencia Creek in order to increase the run of steelhead trout.

Crew members working at the park last Wednesday represented a near- microcosm of the ethnic makeup of the corps. Funded by the California Department of Conservation and private foundations, it enrolls 120 members, ages 18 to 23, through the year and an additional 100 during the summer.

Other countries represented by current enrollees include Cambodia, Laos, several in South America, Portugal, Ireland and New Guinea, said Executive Director Bob Hennessy.

"People send word to those countries through agencies and individuals that the South Bay is an attractive place to live. Their friends tell them the corps is a good program, what they get here, and here they come."

There can be a waiting list of up to 10 months, he said.

Hassan, who is from northern Somalia, has been in San Jose eight months and expects to attend San Jose City College beginning in January. Ahmed, from southern Somalia, has lived here seven months and, after graduating from the corps in three months, expects to join the San Jose Job Corps, a similar, federally funded program.

As they gathered 2-inch-diameter rocks that other crew members would cement onto the wall, they were joined by Ha Nguyen, 20, who came here from Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, five years ago.

Nguyen has been in the corps for three months and is taking drafting and computer courses at San Jose State University.

Also gathering rocks was Monica Cortes, 22, who came here two years ago from Guanajuato, Mexico. She has been in the corps for one year and expects to begin study of computers at San Jose City College in January.

Forty-five percent of the corps members are of Hispanic background and 40 percent Asian, Hennessy said. Not all are recent immigrants; an estimated 35 percent have been living in this area for some time. Eight to 10 of the members each year have either run away from home or been kicked out.

Highway 87 project

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All are from low-income or very low-income households, and most read below the sixth-grade level. None is here illegally.

Earlier this year, the corps finished a joint project with the city to plant 5,000 15-gallon trees along the Highway 87 corridor. The corps' portion consisted of 3,500 trees; 1,500 trees were planted by Our City Forest volunteers at schools and parks.

Other corps jobs are building and repairing trails and building fences in city and county parks; revegetation and landscaping in conjunction with the Santa Clara Valley Water District; cleaning debris from the Guadalupe and Coyote rivers; installing play areas at parks in cities near San Jose; and removing graffiti in nearby cities.

### Strict rules

Corps members are paid an initial hourly wage of \$4.75, which rises to \$5.25 after six months. They work four days and take English As A Second Language and other courses on the fifth day. They have a General Education Diploma when they graduate from the corps, usually after 11 months.

"Everyone enrolls for a year," Hennessy said. "If they get a regular job sooner, they can leave. If they don't perform, they're terminated." Chronic tardiness is the second major reason for termination, he said.

"We have strict rules," Hennessy said, against non-punctuality, non-attendance, refusal to work, drugs and alcohol, and violence and threats. "We stress that you've got to have the work ethic," he said.

A small number of corps members are promoted to recycling drivers and crew leaders during a second year and are paid more. Forty percent of the corps work involves recycling material collected from multi-office buildings, schools and restaurants. It is sorted in a yard at corps headquarters and sold.

### Prospect of college

Some corps workers also get jobs at County Transit, in warehouses and with delivery, landscaping and irrigation companies. About 15 percent go on to college.

Last year, under a one-year grant from Pacific Gas & Electric Co., 58 corps graduates attended either college or the county occupational training center at 760 Hillsdale Ave. About half were young women, including three who took nursing training. "They did remarkably well," Hennessy said.

"It's amazing how many of our kids go to school four nights a week, a couple (of) hours each night, advancing themselves in English and math and so on. We certainly support that."

## Notes

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## Graphic

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Photos (2);

PHOTO: RICHARD WISDOM -- MERCURY NEWS

Abdifatah Ahmed, left, and Jose Carate work on a corps project.

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PHOTO: RICHARD WISDOM -- MERCURY NEWS

California **Conservation Corps** workers Imram Hassan, Abdifatah Ahmed and Martin Ramec **work on** a retaining wall at Alum Rock Park.

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