

'This Is Pretty Dope Community Service' : No Child Left Inside Grant Opens Doors for Juvenile Offenders

Serving Sentences: Youths Descend on Rainbow Falls State Park as Part of Program to Connect Offenders With Science and Opportunity

By Jordan Nailon / jnailon@chronline.com Nov 1, 2016 1



A youth under the charge of the Lewis County Juvenile Court system walks atop a moss covered stone foundation as he hauls a trash bag while helping to clean up an abandoned illegal campsite at the Willapa Hills Trail State Park on Saturday afternoon. Photo: Jordan Nailon.

When Rachel Stendahl saw an open call for grant applications through a program created by the state Legislature called “No Child Left Inside,” she knew she had the perfect idea. However, as a first-time grant writer she had no idea if she would be successful in pitching her case.

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Call it beginner's luck if you like, because Stendahl was surprised herself when back in June she found out that her project was one of 12 selected from 96 applicants.

Stendahl's project was the only one selected in Southwest Washington, and perhaps even more surprising was the fact that she received the full allotment she'd asked for.

On Saturday, Stendahl was putting her plan to work with a group of youths from the Lewis County Juvenile Court system. The youths were slated for incarceration for various infractions, but through a community service component of the court, they were allowed instead to work off at least part of their debt to society by participating in Stendahl's program.



A young scientist in training tries to figure out what went wrong during a failed water quality testing experiment at Rainbow Falls State Park on Saturday morning. Photo: Jordan Nailon.

As the regional science coordinator for Educational Service District 113 and program lead for the Chehalis Basin Education Consortium, Stendahl has been hard at work implementing her grand vision for utilizing science and outdoors activities in the reformation process, particularly for young offenders.

"I'm just passionate about science and sharing science with others," explained Stendahl.

Stendahl, a graduate of The Evergreen State College, said she became infatuated with the concept of science-based rehabilitation work while getting her Geoduck education in Olympia where the college runs a highly successful Sustainability in Prisons Project. The program tasks full-grown offenders with projects that put them knee-deep in their own rich compost, on their hands and knees pulling weeds in the garden or tapping their delicate touch as they raise butterflies, just to name a few. With that model as a base for her inspiration, Stendahl decided to bring a similar program to Lewis County's youngest offenders.

"This is the most left inside group of kids that we have," said Stendahl. "It's a whole captive audience that's not having any programs, and should be."

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On Saturday, Stendahl and two co-workers supervised a group of five youths from the Lewis County Juvenile Court System during a day outside. In the morning, the group conducted water quality tests on the Chehalis River from Rainbow Falls State Park. They worked in groups to test the river's pH balance, the turbidity and nitrate levels. The pH was perfect, the turbidity was normal and no nitrates were recorded. That's all good news, but to Stendahl, the best part was that the supposed "bad kids" were being exposed to a slice of their surroundings that they had not previously known.

"Hopefully we're getting these kids some more ownership to this river, and their home," said Stendahl.



Sadie Gilliom of the Chehalis Basin Education Consortium supervises while a youth conducts a water quality experiment at Rainbow Falls State Park on Saturday. The project brought youths from the Lewis County Juvenile Court system out to conduct the water. Photo: Jordan Nailon.

Stendahl guessed that most of the youths wound up in trouble for truancy issues at school. One girl who chose to participate in the program in an effort to reduce her original sentence of five years in juvenile detention admitted that her rap sheet included counts of burglary and assault.

Those grim specifics are not what's important to Stendahl though.

"I try not to get caught up in that stuff. I learned that working with incarcerated adults, it's just better to work with a clean slate and base the relationship off of your own interactions," explained Stendahl. "It's so easy to write them off as 'bad kids' but they're so young and they have a lot of time to change. I try to remind people of that."

In addition to the water quality testing science component of the day, the penance-serving youths spent the surprisingly sunny afternoon in Pe Ell at Willapa Hills Trail State Park on a cleanup mission. A secluded nook of the park with the footprint of an abandoned rock foundation had become a popular transient hideaway over the summer months. The gatherings meant rampant drug and alcohol use in the park and resulted in a revolting collection of tires, couches and assorted garbage stacking up in the area. With the help of a few chain saw-toting state park workers, the

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group set about thinning the trees surrounding the site and cleaning up the remnants of the illegal camp.

“The marshals would try to do raids down there but they’d usually just scatter. They’re not going to want to hang out down there if it’s all exposed,” explained Washington State Park Ranger Chloe Nelson, who was on hand for the water testing and cleanup actions on Saturday. “In the offseason especially we’re a little shorthanded and even four or five extra hands is a big help.”

Nelson noted that occasionally she will get help from Boy Scouts looking for a merit badge or some other solo Good Samaritan, but she’d never before had the help of a consolidated group like the one that Stendahl organized.

“I think it’s great,” said Nelson. “I’m totally happy to have them here. I’m excited that they are using this as an educational component.”



Carlos Sanchez, Community Service Officer for the Lewis County Juvenile Court, takes stock of the cleanup progress made at an abandoned illegal campsite on Saturday afternoon. Sanchez supervised a group of youths while they performed court-mandated community service projects at both Rainbow Falls State Park and Willapa Hills Trail State Park. Photo: Jordan Nailon.

Because the projects are a part of the Lewis County Juvenile Court system, there is also a necessary component of structure and discipline. That’s where Carlos Sanchez comes in.

Sanchez is the community service officer for the Lewis County Juvenile Court system, and he was on hand Saturday to ensure that things went off without a hitch.

“I try to show them respect and then they respect me,” said the easy-going Sanchez of his even-handed approach.

He said that things usually go smoothly, but every once in a while there will be a problem child who insists on making a scene or, feeling spry from the freedom of the outdoors, attempts to get strong handed. Sanchez says it’s his job to keep all of the participants safe and everything in line. As part of

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that effort there is a screening process for participation in the program that excludes the most violent or “high risk” juvenile offenders.

In general though, Sanchez is happy to see as many youths as possible take part in the outdoor education and rehabilitation series.

“I think it’s kids giving back to their community and realizing there is more out there. Looking at this park ranger and realizing that’s a job that you could do, that’s kind of the philosophy of this program,” said Sanchez. “It’s better than being in a room for 23-hour lockdown every day. It gets them out and about.”

For Stendahl, that exposure to what she calls “green jobs” is one of the key elements of the program. It is her hope that by exposing area youths to the realities of in the field science she will open their eyes to the multitude of career opportunities that exist beyond the sterile lab coat settings of the lecture hall and fluorescent lighted classroom.

Previously, the juvenile detention work crew has been deployed to plant trees in key riparian zones on private property along area rivers that are prone to flooding and erosion. Each week, Stendahl helps to organize a watershed education workshop that is taught within the confines of the juvenile detention facility. In the future, she’s hoping to connect the dots even further.

“They also have a greenhouse so I’m hoping on growing some native aquatic plants in the greenhouse and then taking them out in the field to plant them,” said Stendahl. “We’re trying to make this a complete circle kind of thing.”

Stendahl has also organized an environmental lecture workshop series where guest speakers will visit the detention center in order to open the eyes of the incarcerated youths to the vast array of careers that science and the natural world can lead to. Stendahl refers to these early efforts as a “pilot program” and noted that a major part of her work so far has been navigating the various roadblocks that act to prevent such intensive educational work happening inside the juvenile detention system.

One day she even hopes to implement a similar style program at the Green Hill School that sits next to the juvenile detention center in Chehalis.

For now though, Stendahl will have to find her happiness in these small doses of success.

As one proficient young bushwhacker and astute scientist in training pointed out on Saturday, “This is pretty dope community service.”

For more information on the No Child Left Inside grant project or to volunteer as a guest speaker in the environmental lecture workshop series contact Rachel Stendahl at rstendahl@esd113.org.

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