

Living OUTSIDE

THIS WEEKENDS WEATHER



Today
HIGH: 86
LOW: 69

Warm and
humid. Chance
of thunderstorm.



Saturday
HIGH: 84
LOW: 66

Partly cloudy,
warm, humid.



Sunday
HIGH: 87
LOW: 63

Partly sunny,
warm humid.

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VERMONT
YOUTH
CONSERVATION
CORPS

BUILDING CHARACTER

Vermont Youth Conservation Corps leaders prepare for 20th summer

Story and photo by Joshua Brown
Free Press Correspondent

Kegan Tierney sat at a picnic table in Elmore State Park and pointed to the fire tower at the top of Mount Elmore.

"I'll get them there by 4 in the morning at least once," he said, "for the sunrise."

"Them" is a crew of teenagers Tierney is charged with this summer, a crew employed by the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps to take care of the park. Sunrise hikes are considered perks of a job that is heavy on checking in campers, cleaning bathrooms and mowing lawns.

Tierney, 25, is direct about his qualifications. "I know how to run stuff," he said, nodding toward a large tractor.

He is just as direct about his goals for his crew. "We'll have fun, get lots of exercise, and eat good food."

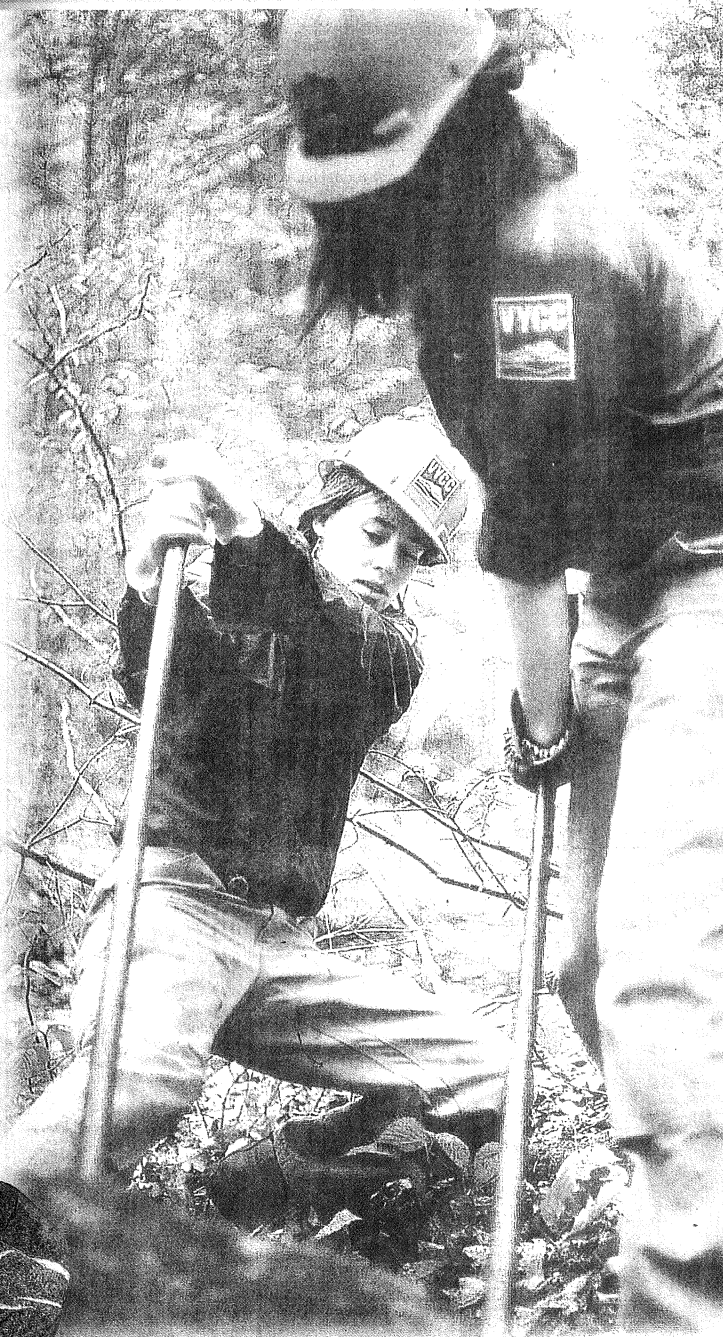
And if all goes well, he'll give his crew an additional rugged reward: a weekly trek to the fire tower.

These hikers will find that the trail is not easy, but along the way they will benefit from the handiwork of their fellow members in the Vermont Youth

"Our crew leaders have a lot of jokes about shopping for rocks."

Conservation Corps. Celebrating its 20th anniversary, the non-profit organization this year will employ more than 200 young people, ages 16 to 24, and 55 crew leaders across Vermont at dozens of projects in state parks, historic sites and natural areas — including rebuilding hiking trails like the one up Mount Elmore.

"We've laid down some puncheon bridging here," explained Polly Tobin, director of field operations for the



Brianna Farver (left), 22, pulls on her rock bar while working with Meagan Robidoux, 28, as part of a crew from the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps in Elmore State Park.

See VYCC, 5C

VYCC: Hands-on outdoor education

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organization, standing on a low walkway that looks like a wooden railroad track over a bog. "It's pretty simple to make, but our wilderness crews also build elaborate foot bridges, with serious engineering, using native timber found on the construction site."

Farther up the trail, the terrain gets steep. "And here is a water bar to prevent erosion," she said, tracing her hand over a series of overlapping stones dug into the trail that direct rainwater off into the woods. "Our crew leaders have a lot of jokes about shopping for rocks."

So why would a new college graduate spend his summer digging up 300-pound boulders with a pick ax?

"At UVM I studied ecological design," said Andrew Hathaway, 22, sitting on a log in the crew leader training camp just off the trail.

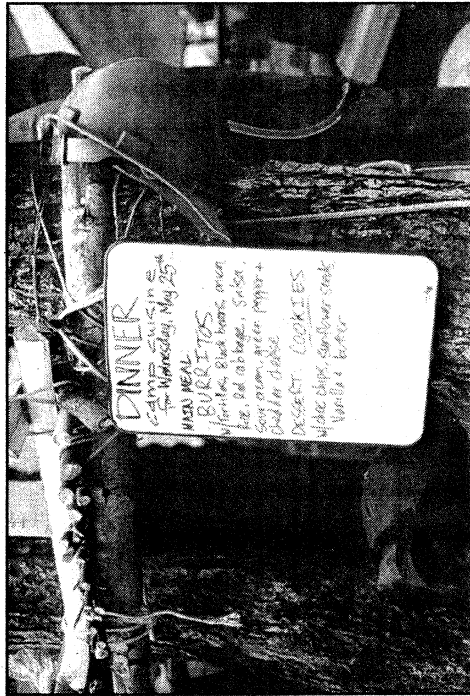
"It's great to come to nature and have to find the solutions right here."

As a third-year veteran of the program, first as crew member and now as leader, Hathaway has this practical art well-honed.

"You walk around poking the ground with your rock bar until you get that 'ping' and then you start to dig," he said. "This job is so satisfying because you get to complete something, like a stone staircase."

"And it's a lot better than my old job at the golf course."

In 1933, when thousands of unemployed young men started arriving in Vermont as part of the Civilian Conservation Corps, they were expected to be physically fit,



Joshua Brown for the Free Press

A white board detailing the evening's menu hangs from a field-built table made from striped maple and string at the Vermont Youth Conservation Corp training camp in Elmore State Park.

unmarried and willing to send \$25 of their \$30 monthly allotment home to their parents. In 1985, Thomas Hark drew on some of this tradition and founded the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps, which put five crew members and one leader to work after receiving an honorary \$1 appropriation from the state legislature.

Today, a VYCC crew member receives about \$280 per week. Crew leaders get more. The organization has hired young men and women from almost every town in the state and every tax bracket. They have regular discussions and writing exercises from a collection of essays, and are required to live up to expectations that range from respecting others in the group to a smoking ban.

This year the VYCC budget has grown to \$1.7 million and the

State Park in Randolph, mountain bike trails in Rutland, hiking bridges in Weissen Woods in Stowe and rebuilt sections of a nature trail in Sterling Gore.

"The best education is what you learn hands-on," she said. "At the end of last summer, I knew I wanted to come back. It's so important that today's youth get outside, without TV."

Now 22, Kyle Mason seems to prove the point.

"I grew up in Poultney. When I was 17, this was just a summer job, but then I got hooked," he said. "Having a crew is like taking one kid from each lunch table at a high school and getting them to work together and get along," he said, explaining why he is returning for a sixth year with the corps, this summer as the crew manager at Branbury State Park, a favorite swimming destination midway between Brandon and Middlebury.

For his part, Keegan Tierney is satisfied at Elmore State Park.

"The view from the fire tower is nice," he said. "You can see Jay Peak, all down the Hogback Range, over to Mount Mansfield, into the Lamoille Valley."

Working with Vermont's Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation and more than 70 other partnering organizations, VYCC crew leaders like Tierney hope to conserve some of the best wildlife habitats, favorite camping sites, and historic buildings in Vermont — and that hikers will find a well-maintained trail to the top of Mount Elmore for generations to come.

"This is a good job," he said, heading back to his mowing tractor.



Vermont Youth Conservation Corps

"To teach individuals to take personal responsibility for all of their actions"

- Young people, ages 16 - 24, work in teams to complete conservation projects.
- Founded in 1985 by president Thomas Hark.
- New headquarters at Monitor Barn, Richmond.
- 2005 budget: \$1.7 million with 51 percent federal and state funding and 75 project sponsors, including: Vermont Agency of Transportation, Vermont Old Cemetery Association, U.S. Forest Service, Catamount Trail Association, Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation, Green Mountain Club, Lake Champlain Basin Program, The Nature Conservancy, Vermont Department of Employment and Training, Moosalamoo Association.
- Crew dates: Park, June 18 - Aug. 27; community, June 20-Aug. 5; roving, June 18-July 16 and July 30-Aug. 28.
- Learn more or apply at www.vycc.org.

2004 ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Some of the work VYCC crews completed last summer:

- 100,358 feet of new trail
- 81,125 hours worked
- 1,263 feet of bridges
- 1,246 feet of turnpiking
- 553 rock steps
- 251 water bars
- 100 weeks of trail and watershed work completed
- 86 drainage dips
- 57 project sites around Vermont, including six parks
- 16 check dams
- 13 benches
- 12 conference tables