

Inner-city teens get a new view - Robert Rogers, Staff Writer

OFF THE STREETS AND INTO THE WOODS

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LYTLE CREEK - Bobby Vega has always been a city guy. The 48-year-old has spent his entire life on San Bernardino's rugged Westside, and the streets are as much a part of him as the blood in his veins.

So when he looks around this rugged wilderness, the rocky slopes and spiny blend of desert, chaparral and alpine vegetation just west of the 15 Freeway, Vega sees it within the context of neighborhood.

"This is where it's at," Vega said, sipping coffee and wearing a bright orange U.S. Forest Service vest. "You get the kids from the inner-city communities up here, and it frees them, everything that they've learned in that environment just falls away when you get them away from it."

That's the philosophy behind a new partnership between Vega, the U.S. Forest Service, county public housing and numerous local corporations that will initially bring about 30 at-risk San Bernardino and Redlands teens into the local mountains monthly to learn about nature and unlearn the credos of the streets.

Dubbed the San Bernardino National Forest Association's Youth Conservation Corps, the program targets at-risk teens ages 16 to 19, a group Vega contends are aged out of many public programs designed to reach inner-city youths.

The program is meant to be a holistic blend of nature education, responsibility-building, along with monetary incentives and the crucial opportunity for teens to see life from a perspective outside the one they've developed on the streets, Vega said.

Kids are expected to sign contracts stipulating how they'll behave and treat others. A \$60 monthly stipend is a powerful allure to abide by the rules.

"The whole idea of a contract, which is important in society, is something these kids are totally unprepared for," Vega said. "Plus, this money is like an allowance. Middle class kids act a certain way and get an allowance, but these kids don't have that because of their families and the financial situations they're born into."

The kids who will be involved initially are some of the most in need, coming from the Waterman Gardens and Medical Center Drive public-housing communities in San Bernardino. Some kids will also come from Redlands, Vega said.

The Urban Youth Corps will also share resources and personnel with the Great Seeds Native Plant Restoration Program, which was launched in 2006 and enlists kids ages 11 to 17 to work on forest restoration projects. Altogether, the programs will reach more than 60 youths initially, said Children's Forest Executive Director Sarah Miggins.

Children's Forest, which is a partner in Vega's conservation program, is one of a handful of nonprofits managed by the San Bernardino National Forest Association. Through such programs, the service can attract supplemental funding for youth outreach and forest restoration programs, Miggins said.

Southern California Edison regional manager Ray Gonzalez presented Miggins and Vega a \$10,000 check at the Lytle Creek forest-service station on Thursday, and Miggins said total public and private support is already above \$100,000.

"As these programs mature and impact more area youths, we expect to attract more support," Miggins said.

For information on how to support the programs or enroll a child, contact Bobby Vega at (909) 884-6018 or Sarah Miggins at (909)382-2600, Ext. 4802.

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