

Tools, Trails and Tired Teenagers

by Rebecca Patterson-Markowitz

On May 1, five students from City High School completed their final Seeds of Stewardship outing of the academic year. The final component involved practicing stewardship through a trail maintenance project on the Arizona Trail. Our group met up with Jeff Bridge, Southern Regional Steward for the Arizona Trail Association, and Tom Kimmel, a trail volunteer and leader of Tom's Sawyers, at Oracle State Park.



Josh Levin swings a pick mattock

Tom gave a presentation on tool use and safety, and best practices for lopping branches. The students gave their utmost attention throughout the presentation, trying to memorize the new names like "Pulaski" and "McLeod" and absorb all the information they were about to put into action.

We hiked our way up a nearby hill covered in low vegetation consisting of prickly pears with yellow blossoms and shrubby mesquite trees. We took turns carrying tools and a heavy cooler filled with our lunches and drinks. Our selected section of trail was on a northern facing downslope and we spent most of our time trying to repair some erosion damage. We also removed thistle and grasses within the trail corridor and knocked back the berm on the critical edge of the trail. We split into two crews lead by Jeff and Tom, and got to work.

As pick mattocks rose and fell and McLeods scraped and shaped the earth we began to see the ground transforming slowly under our feet. Our stretch of trail was not a very long one, and a new appreciation for all the trails we had traveled earlier in the year dawned on the students. We were sweating, taking regular breaks to drink enough water, and relishing digging up the damp earth, uprooting grasses and thistles, and lopping off wayward branches to clear the path for others. Tom encouraged everyone to be mindful and strategic when pruning to imagine keeping branches out of the trail not for a year, but for the next five. After a little over an hour of hard work in the sun we sought out some shade and passed around trail mix and munched on our lunches. From our little spot out in the dirt, we had a view of distant mountain ranges that appeared purple in the afternoon sun.

We kept lunch brief so as to have enough time to finish our project. After lunch the two crews worked together, clearing away rocks, tamping the trail, and digging drainages. Olivia quickly became the drainage expert of the group, moving from one to the next, clearing and sloping the sides to be considerate of mountain bikers like

herself. When it was time to go, we could see the fruits of our labor in the freshly turned and cleared ground stretching down the slope.

Before leaving, our leaders both took time to share with the students their passion for the Arizona Trail and the impact that the students' service had for all trail users. Students shared what had surprised them, or something that they had learned from the experience. A few of the students talked about how they had never considered how much work it took not only to make, but to maintain a trail. Martin, who had been quietly wetting down his clothing and the tops of his shoes the entire time said, "I learned not to wear black next time!"



Olivia and Josh, happy trail stewards

There was a collective siesta in the van on the way back to town. As the students hopped out upon return to school we said our goodbyes, for now, until next year.



City High School staff and students after a long day of volunteer work on the Arizona Trail

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