

Young Stewards in the Making

by Rebecca Patterson-Markowitz



On December 4, 2015 six students from Mansfeld Middle School participated as members of a trail crew at Saguaro National Park East. This was their final outing of the semester, and it was time to put their stewardship principles into action. Jeff, who was our crew leader from SNP, had a three-person crew of his own and met us at the Camino Loma Alta Trailhead. After a round of introductions, the students shared their favorite thing about the desert. Jordan, who was uncharacteristically shy, blushed and scrunched up her shoulders as she said, "My name is Jordan, and my favorite thing in the desert is umm, how the mountains look against the sky." Our crew leaders' eyes widened a bit at the unexpected poetics of a 7th grader, and they nodded in agreement.

Once the team rapport was established, Jeff offered words of encouragement and tool safety reminders to the 7th graders and we hiked two miles to the Quilter Trail. After some water and an instructional break, Jeff showed the students how to trim branches off the trees by following the wayward branch back as close to the main branch or trunk as possible. He then demonstrated with a particularly nasty catclaw acacia how to remove and then "stash" the branches. The students learned how responsible brushing helps the tree, and also the importance of keeping the "leave no trace" ethics in operation as much as possible when doing trail work.



Jeff teaches proper brushing technique



Jordan with her clippers

Jordan was first up to bat with a catclaw, and she faced a little bit of uncertainty with her new task. Her clippers neared the branch and another fit of giggles came with an "I don't know how to do this!" She got words of encouragement from Jeff and the others, and her self-confidence grew. The other students watched her first endeavor and learned from her successful larger branch removals. As we moved up the trail it became clear that some of the prickly pear needed to be cut back as well. This quickly became everyone's favorite job. They lopped off the big pads and skewered them with the blades to be deposited somewhere off the trail. As we were nearing the end of the brushing session, Ian dropped a pad squarely on his foot! As the rest of the students took a lunch break in the shade, he sat like a champion while having sizable thorns picked out of his toes.

At the end of the day, students did a reflection activity before leaving. First we sat and completed a sound map for the environment. They were then asked to reflect on two ways they were stewards of the Arizona Trail and Saguaro National Park that day. Their answers reflected an understanding that stewardship ranges from “helping the community” to the “taking care of the plants.”



Budding young stewards on the AZT!



Mansfeld Middle School volunteers – the next generation of Arizona Trail stewards.

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