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## **Visits to National Parks by Elizabeth Youth Inspires Community Service in NJ Summer Program**

**Elizabeth, N.J. August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2008**—Here is a surefire recipe for success. Take one part urban youth, one part AmeriCorps, two parts National Park, daily education, visits by motivational speakers, and mix well. The resulting concoction adds up to a group of youth whose Summer is transformed from just another hot day to one motivated to serve the local community.

From June through August, 2008, local youth from Jefferson Park Ministries Summer Program, guided by carefully chosen AmeriCorps volunteers, spent eight weeks learning, cleaning, planting, hiking, and giving back to the community. The program was initiated by a grant from the New Jersey Commission on National and Community Service to the United Way of Greater Union County, and was strategically combined with a National Park Service Green Team Program. Activities were coordinated by Groundwork Elizabeth, a local 501c3 non-profit dedicated to changing places, changing lives.

### **New Jersey's Program part of a Nationwide Campaign**

The State of New Jersey's AmeriCorps Summer of Service Program is part of a nationwide campaign to educate and inspire at risk youth to understand and serve their community. The campaign comes on the heels of a 2007 study that found that while volunteering produces many positive benefits for teens from low-income backgrounds, there is a disturbing "class gap" in teen volunteer rates. Youth from disadvantaged circumstances have a volunteer rate of 43 percent, compared to 59 percent for other youth.

For 2007 and again in 2008, the nationwide campaign engaged participants between the ages of 5 and 21 in high-quality volunteer activities from June through August. The drive recognized the enormous potential of children to identify issues, develop projects, and provide lasting benefits to their communities through volunteer service.

Elizabeth's program consisted of daily education via a curriculum developed by a local educator, Lily Chaika, who also serves as an integral part of Groundwork Elizabeth's High School Green Team Program during the school year. Each day Groundwork Elizabeth delivered a new lesson from the curriculum to youth in the program and its AmeriCorps contingent. The program's participants were first presented the "Discovering Nature in Elizabeth" guide, which was developed by the Groundwork Green Team, and later to lessons in self esteem, litter abatement, recycling, plants, insects, and a continuing variety of challenging and interesting subjects. On certain days, guest speakers such as Shawn McClain from Elizabethport Presbyterian Center

and instructor Dave Wiener spoke about the natural world, and also about giving back to the community.

### **The National Park Service role**

This Summer the group of approximately 25 youth aged 14 to 19, AmeriCorps volunteers, and representatives from Groundwork visited two National Parks, Jacob Riis National Park in Brooklyn, and Delaware Gap National Park. In both locations the participants were introduced to the National Park System, its history and importance, and job possibilities. During a recent visit to the Delaware Water Gap, National Park Rangers Ryan Coury and Jhantteil Lopez guided the group on a four mile hike which proved to be the “longest walk ever taken” by most of the youth. The two National Park employees provided a lot of information on plants and animals along the way, showing the group how to look for nature. Coury stressed the value of studying the ground carefully during the journey, often finding interesting plants and insects hidden to those only taking a quick look. The National Park Ranger’s message was, “Sometimes it’s not what you see, but what you don’t see that is important”.

### **Service to the Community a key goal**

In addition, as part of the National Park Service’s Green Team Summer Program, the group also made a trip to the Saw Mill River with two other Groundwork organizations from Bridgeport, Connecticut, and Yonkers, N.Y. where team building activities were joined with Service activities. The skills learned in Yonkers were then brought back to Elizabeth where the team helped in an ongoing Elizabeth River restoration program with the Union County Department of Parks and Community Development, and with cleanups in front of the Magic Fountain and at a local church.

During the last week of the program, the five AmeriCorps volunteers, Elsie Pagan, Mariana Dussan, Tedwick Theodore, Edwin Loiseau, and Kevin Fenelus, visited the Elizabeth Racquet Club and engaged campers from the City of Elizabeth Summer Camp in a program on stopping littering. Campers listened attentively as the AmeriCorps Summer of Service volunteers showed them how even 5 to 10 year olds can make a difference in keeping Elizabeth clean and green. At the conclusion of the program, one of the campers came up to a presenter and said, “I’m never going to litter again in my whole life”.

### **Local community leaders provide key support.**

Mayor Chris Bollwage has personally supported Groundwork since its beginnings in 2003. The Mayor commended the partnerships garnered during the Summer of Service Program and said, “we want to make our City a greener place for our residents and visitors, and Groundwork Elizabeth gives us another avenue to accomplish these goals”.

Jefferson Park Ministries Executive Director Catherine Santilien was extremely pleased with the program and said, “It has been a pleasure to have the AmeriCorps young people

around for the summer. Summer of Service allows the youth to give back to the community in a very meaningful way. We hope to have them again next year.”

Dave Stochak, who serves as the Executive Director of the Elizabeth Avenue Partnership is a seasoned trekker who has hiked as far away as New Zealand, participated in the Delaware Water Gap hike. As a Groundwork Board member Stochak noted, “The National Park Ranger Ryan Coury’s comments about what you don’t see are more than just about nature. By participating in Service, sometimes you can’t see your results right away, but they have an effect in the long run”.

Groundwork hopes to partner again with the United Way of Greater Union County, JPM, and its other collaborators. “This Summer’s Program did exactly what our Groundwork mission calls for”, said Jonathan Phillips, Executive Director of Groundwork, “we learned, we shared, we changed places, and certainly changed lives”.

James W. Horne, Jr., Chief Executive Officer of United Way of Greater Union County stated: “It’s important to participate in these kinds of volunteer activities because you see firsthand how your efforts impact people’s lives in a very meaningful way.” “It’s always great to see innovative programs like Groundwork’s Summer Program in action, engaging the energies and vigor of young adults to make a difference in the community,” he added.