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AmeriCorps Week & Signature Service Project

Russ Mawby Signature Service Project: Kalamazoo or Bust!

More than 250 Michigan's AmeriCorps*State, National, and VISTA members gathered together to serve Kalamazoo's Northside Neighborhood and riverfront corridor on May 14 and 15 as part of the 2010 Russ Mawby Signature Service Project (SSP). Members assisted with various community projects and engaged in a large-scale clean-up of the Kalamazoo River. Each year AmeriCorps members from across Michigan join together for two days of training, teambuilding, and service. By the end of the second day, several projects are completed, visibly demonstrating the power of Michigan's AmeriCorps members in action.

The event began with an inspiring kick-off at Counting to One Ministries where AmeriCorps members had the opportunity to hear from the project's namesake, Dr. Russell Mawby. Members were then divided into various project teams and dispersed throughout the Northside Neighborhood where they assisted with clean-up and landscaping projects and helped install a large playground unit at New Genesis Education Center.

Service Project and excited to have the opportunity to showcase the rich assets of our strong and vibrant community," said Don Jones, executive director of the Kalamazoo Valley Habitat for Humanity. "Habitat thrives through community partnerships. Our AmeriCorps visitors will expand our partnerships with agencies, volunteers, and neighbors to make a positive impact on our northside community."



Working hard to remove invasive species at the Kalamazoo River.

"We are honored to host the Signature

Signature Service Project (cont.)

The 2010 Russ Mawby Signature Service Project also served as an official closing event for Michigan's 2010 AmeriCorps Week. AmeriCorps Week is a nationwide recruitment and recognition event designed to bring more Americans into service, salute AmeriCorps members and alums for their powerful impact, and thank the community partners who make AmeriCorps possible.

Throughout the two days of service, Michigan's AmeriCorps members received encouraging words from other special guests, including Kalamazoo Mayor Bobby Hopewell and Michigan Community Service Commission Executive Director Paula Kaiser VanDam.

This year's Signature Service Project was a partnership between Michigan's AmeriCorps, Habitat for Humanity of Michigan, and Kalamazoo Valley Habitat for Humanity. The Signature Service Project is an annual event that serves a different community each year.

Fun 2010 Signature Service Project Facts

On May 14 and 15, more than 350 participants – including AmeriCorps members, alums, and community volunteers – accomplished the following:

- Cleaned a one-mile stretch of the Kalamazoo River Valley Trail, removing trash and invasive plants.
- Installed a large playground unit at New Genesis Education Center.
- Fenced and tilled two community gardens at New Genesis Education Center.
- Completed grounds-beautification projects at five area non-profits.
- Constructed three new planter boxes and weeded and maintained 10 pre-existing planter boxes.
- Moved nearly 2.5 tons of mulch, gravel, and top soil to assist local landscaping projects.
- Contributed more than 3,500 hours of service as a group.



Members from around the state joining together in Kalamazoo to get things done for America!

Getting Things Done!

By: Mykeia Tyner
Camp Fire USA

After participating in two different Russ Mawby Signature Service Projects, the advice I have for someone new to this experience is this: "It will be tiring. You will work hard. You will meet new people. You will do things that you have never done before. And you will have fun!"

My group spent the two days cutting down overgrown bushes and trees along the river, as well as pulling invasive species that were taking over the riverbank and choking out the native plants. I had never used huge gardening sheers or pulled honeysuckle before, and while it wasn't exactly my area of expertise, I had a good time because we were doing it for the right reasons. The job needed to be done and it helped make the trails safer for the

community.

The first day was challenging as we all struggled to know what to do, but my group used a lot of teamwork and encouragement. It was very fun meeting new people and learning about the different AmeriCorps programs across Michigan.

I really enjoyed this year's project because we were able to make a definite impact on the community. The riverbank and trail were cleared of a lot of brush and invasive plants, making it safer for people to enjoy and improving the health of the area. Over the two days, we saw immediate results and were able to finish our project! It was satisfying to know we were leaving Kalamazoo a little better than when we arrived. Looking around at the

hundreds of members I was proud to be a part of this AmeriCorps group that is so eager and focused on coming together and getting things done!



Camp Fire USA members getting things done in Kalamazoo.

The Importance of Beautification

By: Kate Amour
Cherry Street Health Services

During AmeriCorps week I was involved with the team's effort to restore a neighborhood mural. I love the concept of communal art helping to bring beauty and a shared sense of pride to urban environments and was therefore particularly excited about this project. However, the first morning when I showed up early to start prepping the mural I quickly became overwhelmed and began to despair. I had only seen pictures and didn't fully comprehend how much work this mural needed. It was huge and complex, the paint was chipping off in many sections, weeds were growing from above and below blocking the mural, there were random large blocks of solid color attempting to cover up graffiti; it was a mess. But when my teammates arrived we started in cleaning,

weeding, chipping off loose paint, picking up trash in the area, and soon we started to see a difference. The neighborhood noticed too.

We had people driving past that would honk their support and people walking by that would say how excited they were to have someone restoring the old mural. One man even pulled over to ask why we would be out doing something like that in his neighborhood. When we told him we were AmeriCorps members, he tilted his head to the side, looked at us piercingly, then just said a simple thank you and drove off. This experience was repeated again the last day we worked on the mural. We spent the afternoon putting the finishing touches on

the mural, including the new neighborhood association logo. I was finishing the logo when a staff member from the neighborhood association came by with her high school age son.

She told us how much positive feedback she had gotten from neighbors and how she wanted her son to be involved in a great project like this. He and I painted side by side for a time and I realized how many people a project like the mural restoration helps to bring together. This project, while overwhelming at times, has reinforced my belief in and support of community art in urban spaces, and my belief that AmeriCorps members can make a difference in the communities they serve.

Transformative Service

By: Gopi Patel
City Year Detroit

With City Year Detroit, members are in schools Monday through Thursday every week. That only gives me four days a week to make a difference with my kids. When you subtract one of those days for City Year events, office days, days off, or service projects you really are down to two or three full days a week with the students.

AmeriCorps Week wasn't any different. I had only been in the classroom for two days. When I told my students I wasn't going to be in the classroom for the rest of the week, they were upset, but not as much as I thought they would be. LaNita, who has always been upset when I'm not there to work with her, didn't mind as much that I wouldn't be there to help her with her writing assignment. Briana was confident she didn't need my help to talk her through the daily struggles of being a middle school student. It made me feel happy to know all my hard work had actually made a difference! It made me more than ready to tackle the service project I had waiting for me in Kalamazoo.

When I got to New Genesis, I knew that transforming a playground would be hard work;

I knew I would get dirty and tired; but I also knew I had to use my strength to keep going. By pulling out an endless amount of weeds, painting old and sometimes rusted equipment, and transforming the playground cement, I knew I was giving the children resources to grow and to play with.

Seeing all the different AmeriCorps members from across Michigan made my heart smile to know we were all in Kalamazoo for one reason: to do transformative service, which is exactly what we did. At the end of Saturday, seeing the smiles on the faces of the neighborhood kids when they saw the wonderful, new playground was more than enough for me.



City Year leading members in exercises before a day of service.

Healthy Families

By: Erin Sloan
Michigan Primary Care Association

In the gymnasium of the Lincoln School, families visited tables adorned with blue and white balloons to learn about the health resources available in the Jackson community. On Saturday, May 15, AmeriCorps members from the Michigan Primary Care Association hosted the Community HealthCorps Day, held in celebration of AmeriCorps Week.

Eighteen families attended the event and learned about enrolling in Michigan's low-cost and free children's health insurance programs, services of the Center for Family Health and the Great Start Collaborative, and AmeriCorps. Free

blood pressure checks were available, as well as BMI testing.

After many families registered, children and their parents sat attentive on the mats as they listened to Dr. Seuss' "Oh the Things You Do That Are Good for You" and "The Berenstain Bears Too Much Junk Food." Children got active at the "Let's Get Moving" station, chasing balloons and engaging in physical exercise games. The children had their faces painted with colorful pictures of rainbows and animals and each chose healthy snacks such as yogurt and granola bars.

Families also had the opportunity to tour an ambulance and talk with an EMT. Families left the event with goodies from each booth and many won prizes that encouraged health, including a Frisbee, sunscreen, animal-shaped ice packs, and Band-Aids.

The event was a success and the families that attended thoroughly enjoyed participating and meeting with the various vendors. Participants also enjoyed hearing about the service projects and accomplishments AmeriCorps members are doing in the community.

The Heart of Russ Mawby *By: Matt Reaume* *Michigan Community Service Commission*

The 2010 Russ Mawby Signature Service Project found hundreds of Michigan's AmeriCorps members getting things done in Kalamazoo's northside community. The two-day weekend project was my second as an AmeriCorps member. The event afforded me the opportunity to become acquainted with a part of the city I had never visited before and was an eye-opening experience that helped shape my understanding of the challenges communities across the state face every day.

As with any large-scale service project, there were bumps along the road. In the field of service, one may experience frustration in the face of adverse circumstances. In my case, a compilation of non-stop travel, consecutive 12-hour days, early mornings, sore feet, and a sun-burned face took its toll on maintaining a positive attitude at times.

However, walking through the community we were about to serve immediately brought things into perspective. Reading articles in the newspaper or watching a brief news clip on television may give a person some idea as to the gravity of any community's condition, but witnessing

the blight first-hand is sobering. As I strolled along the streets on the second day I could feel the pangs of shame slowly come over me as I asked myself, what on earth do I have to complain about?

Kalamazoo is one community in one state. In cities all across the country a person will find staggering challenges; a severe lack of educational opportunity, employment, access to nutritious food...the list goes on and on. And by accident of birth, I have been provided with more opportunity in a single year than hundreds of thousands if not millions of people have had in an entire lifetime - all of whom are living right here beside us.

People ask me why I tolerate a living stipend that barely helps me make ends meet. They ask why I spend so much time on the road, why I take weekends away from my friends and family to serve people I don't know in places I don't live. I suppose there are a number of reasons that contribute to my decision to continue the good fight; but listening to Dr. Mawby address hundreds of AmeriCorps members focused the answer sharply in a moment of clarity. Reciting a quote he learned as a child, these were his words:

"I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do *something*. Because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do something that I can do. And what I should do and can do, by the grace of God, I *will* do."



Russ Mawby speaking at SSP.

I continue to serve because it is the right thing to do. Everyone has their unique talents, and serving one's community may come in many different forms for different people. But for me, I wouldn't feel as though my time on earth was productive unless I contributed in some way to providing the kind of opportunity I've been afforded to those less fortunate than myself. In coming away from the service project this year, I am proud to say the weekend, despite its challenges, was very productive.

Coming Together *By: Kate Anne Maitland* *Schools of Hope*

The Signature Service Project in Kalamazoo was more than a group of AmeriCorps members painting homes, organizing community centers, pulling weeds, hauling mulch, or chopping down trees. This project brought



Schools of Hope represented at Kalamazoo's SSP.

together AmeriCorps members from across Michigan in order to achieve a common goal — we wanted to get things done for America!

Learning and working together as a unified group made the service project all the more special and meaningful. One was able to see the amazing work being done in other programs across the state. This project served as a friendly reminder that there are like-minded, public servants wanting to change our world for the better.

The eight-hour days and arduous tasks were challenging at times, but each of us gained a great deal in return. We made new friends, developed professional relationships, and gave back to a community in need. I am very honored to have had the experience in Kalamazoo and even more elated to have had met such wonderful, caring, altruistic individuals.

The Comfort of Fleece

*By: Melinda Seppanen
Superior AmeriCorps*

Superior AmeriCorps works hard to get things done. Without the support of the local community, our team knows that would be a nearly impossible task. Our service projects have been successful because of the help of more than 100 businesses that have given financial and in-kind contributions. Volunteers and the many hours they have served have also contributed to the success of our service projects, as well as the support of our site supervisors and AmeriCorps staff.

To show our appreciation to all who contributed to making a difference in our community, Superior AmeriCorps held a recognition luncheon on May 14, 2010. Our goal was to thank all our sponsors and volunteers that have contributed to helping us get things done this year.

Site supervisors, community members, sponsors, members of the media, and AmeriCorps members attended the event. Superior AmeriCorps program director, Stacy Crouch, kicked things off with an overview of AmeriCorps.

Short testimonials from three members, four site supervisors, and four community members demonstrated the impact of Superior AmeriCorps.

The community members shared the impact they've seen from our service projects. A representative from the



Preparing fun-bags for kids
as part of AmeriCorps Week.

Department of Human Services spoke about the fleece blankets they received from three of our service projects. The Fleece Blankets for Foster Kids project began after our Member Council representative participated in the MCSC's fleece blanket project at the Michigan Nonprofit SuperConference. Volunteers helped Superior AmeriCorps members make more than 70 fleece blankets this year. The DHS representative said, "When I was told AmeriCorps was delivering blankets, I expected a few small blankets. As I got to the door I saw boxes and boxes of blankets. I couldn't believe it!" It was even more amazing to learn about young children's smiles upon receiving the blankets and being told the blankets were theirs to keep forever.

As an end cap to our AmeriCorps Week recognition luncheon, attendees were invited to assist with a small service project packing activity bags for children. The activity kits were donated to three local hospitals.

Leaving a Legacy

*By: Dawn Gould
Downriver CARES*

On May 10th Downriver CARES hosted the 4th Annual Metro-Detroit AmeriCorps Week Celebration event in partnership with the City of River Rouge. This event brought together hundreds of AmeriCorps members and volunteers from across the region and state to showcase the power of AmeriCorps and provide a day of service to the City of River Rouge. Many service events took place in and around the community.

At Walter White Community Resource Center we set up several informational tables, started a community garden, had free clothes from a clothing closet available for those who needed them, and every family received a free bag

with books and other information about The Guidance Center and AmeriCorps. We also hosted a community carnival.

I have organized the carnival for the past two years and there are lots of fun family activities. Children can participate in games to win prizes and there are free hot dogs, popcorn, snow cones, and face painting available. The carnival is my legacy and I hope the members who come after me will continue on with the tradition.

As part of our AmeriCorps Week kick-off, members were spread throughout the city where they served at Sabbath (school), a senior center, a park, and other locations within the community.

This was my last year kicking off AmeriCorps Week as an AmeriCorps member so it was especially important to me. I was very proud of Downriver CARES for showing tremendous leadership, serving with great grace, and staying until the very end to make sure everything was finished!

Thank you to all the AmeriCorps members from around the state who came out to help us make this event a huge success!

Building a Vision & Culture of Service

By: Abigail Ertel
Huron Pines

Plants are powerful things - they are revered for their beauty, healing powers, and symbolism: red roses for love, laurel for victory, and the poppy for remembrance. For the Huron Pines AmeriCorps Week project on May 11, plants brought together twelve local sponsors and partners to celebrate the 2010 Michigan's AmeriCorps Week and to serve the community of Gaylord, Michigan. And these weren't just any plants – these were native plants!

Native plants are flowers, grasses, trees, and shrubs naturally found in a certain geographic region, rather than from tropical or exotic locations. Native plants add incredible beauty to a setting but are also important habitat providers for birds, butterflies, and wildlife. Just as sunlight and water provide plants with energy to grow, Huron Pines AmeriCorps received support from the generous spirit of the Gaylord community.

The project started small but grew to put out many branches as the number of project partnerships increased. Otsego County Habitat for Humanity helped Huron Pines AmeriCorps select two Habitat homes as sites for native plants landscaping projects. They also worked together to promote a donation drive to benefit the local Habitat for Humanity ReStore. The Otsego Conservation District provided a fourth project site – their Native Plants Demonstration Gardens. The District opened up their new native plants greenhouse for the event kickoff – the perfect setting to start the day! Lowe's of Gaylord selected the Huron Pines AmeriCorps project for their Lowe's Heroes Volunteer Program, providing \$1,200 in supplies and 10 volunteers for the day. Project sites,

support, and materials were in place – it was time to get things done!

On May 11, the project plans successfully took root when more than 35 volunteers arrived ready to demonstrate the power of AmeriCorps! Between the two home gardening sites more than 150 plants were successfully put into the ground. A local gardening club helped design beautiful flowerbeds for each family, adding their own branch to the AmeriCorps Week event. In the Demonstration Gardens volunteers successfully built a compost demonstration site by completing three new bins, installing a concrete pathway, and assembling a compost sifter and tumbler. At the local ReStore, AmeriCorps members and a local government official spoke with customers about the importance of AmeriCorps to the community and how they could get involved and volunteer.

For an entire morning on May 11, Huron Pines AmeriCorps brought together multiple project partners and community volunteers to learn and grow together for the good of their community. The families who live in homes where native plants were installed will be provided with the reward of growing their own food without the added impact of transportation and packaging. Their young children learned first-hand why native plants are important to the environment and that the same shrubs and bushes that feed humans provide necessary food and shelter for wildlife. In the demonstration garden, AmeriCorps Week volunteers helped bring the educational experience provided full circle for the citizens of Gaylord and Otsego County. Now, in

addition to experiencing the greenhouse where plants native to northeast Michigan are grown and seeing the beautiful gardens they create, visitors will learn how to nourish those gardens using food and yard waste they produce. Waste reduction was the resounding theme at the local ReStore as well. Through the service of Huron Pines AmeriCorps members, the ReStore saw donations for May increase by 50%, meaning more household items were kept out of the local landfill and benefited community members in need.



Huron Pines AmeriCorps successfully engaged community partners from a variety of sectors to help celebrate AmeriCorps Week. The dedication of these volunteers who helped plant gardens, celebrate compost, and talk face-to-face with people about the power of AmeriCorps indicates the Huron Pines AmeriCorps program is reaching the communities it serves. On May 11, the community of Gaylord responded overwhelmingly to this effort by coming together to help its citizens and at the same time conserving the forests, lakes, and streams of northeast Michigan.

Why We Serve

By: Kathryn Hills
Foreclosure Corps

As a member of Michigan's Foreclosure Corps, and one who is serving in the Upper Peninsula, I don't have a lot of contact with other AmeriCorps members. The members of our program serve with different housing counseling agencies around the state and we only come together a couple times per year. We try to engage in teambuilding and sharing during our bi-weekly conference calls, but we miss out on certain aspects of being an AmeriCorps member.

Because of this, the Russ Mawby Signature Service Project was a unique experience for me. More than 250 people came together to serve in the Kalamazoo area to celebrate the end of a successful AmeriCorps Week in Michigan. Groups painted, landscaped, organized, and removed invasive species from the riverfront. They also engaged in silly, but important ice-breakers and team-building exercises. They discussed what worked and what could be improved. Among the members, networking was taking place, encouragement was given, and teamwork was exhibited.

As a member of the Riverfront clean-up group, I saw that effective communication matters. When we got started Friday afternoon, we did not receive clear direction about what needed to be done. We had some idea we were supposed to cut branches, pull weeds, and pick up trash. There was little structure and people just did whatever they could. A few people got poison ivy because there had been no warning to watch out for it.

On Saturday, however, each group was assigned a specific invasive species to pull or directed toward certain branches to cut. We were also shown exactly what poison ivy looks like. The transformation of the riverfront was amazing! When we first got there it was overrun with invasive species and resembled a jungle. The river was barely visible from the path. But when we left on Saturday, nearly all the invasive species had been eliminated, the trees had been trimmed so potential muggers could no longer hide behind them, and walkers on the path could enjoy a peaceful view of the river.

It was a neat experience having the opportunity to interact with other AmeriCorps members from all different walks of life. Everyone had a different reason as to why they chose to take a year of their life to participate in AmeriCorps. No matter where we are serving or what we are doing in our service, we are all choosing to serve because we want to help others and make our world a better place.



A member painting playground equipment.

True Happiness in this American Life

By: Linda Cooper
Together We Prepare

As Americans, we tend to stay within our own little bubbles of our comfort zones. Day in and day out, we get up, do what we do, and go to bed. Life can get very "vanilla." My four days with the Jackson family in West Virginia was anything but plain or vanilla.

With eyes wide open, I saw true American poverty. It was similar to what I expected - old, used, rundown stuff. Garbage, dirt - nothing all that tidy. Certainly nothing like my little world in "proper" Zeeland, Michigan.

What I didn't expect was the most precious gift of all. This family glowed with love, gratitude and humbleness. Dealt a less-than-fabulous hand in life, they knew no different than living on their mountain. And that was fine with them. They had each other - grandparents, parents, and

grandchildren - all cozy and together on a small plot of "their mountain." Three generations wholly dedicated to each other's happiness - regardless of their tangible goods.

It was a lesson that has been long overdue for me. I've been yapping it up for a long time now about "simplifying" my life - getting rid of stuff and baggage. What I learned in West Virginia is that "stuff" really doesn't ensure happiness. Love, contentment, family, a mountain complete with kin buried on one side. Humble happiness. Gratitude. Faith. Family. Pure love.

Projects for a Better City *By: Eric Shovein Power of WE Consortium*

On Monday, May 10, The Power of We Consortium's AmeriCorps team started their AmeriCorps Week, led by their invasive species specialist Andy Cease, by marching into the woods north of Lake Lansing equipped with saws and loppers with one task in mind: eliminate and quarantine the invasive species and protect Lansing's trails.



Measuring "walk-ability" in Lansing.

The three targeted invasive species were autumn olive, barberry, and garlic mustard. Each invasive species manifests itself in different ways. The day, therefore, consisted of a lot of cutting with saws, but also pulling invasive species from the ground and collecting them in bags so their seed could not escape back into the woods. This project was congruent with the programs' goal of protecting the environment and expanding trail accessibility.

Two days later, the group reconvened for their second accessibility-related AmeriCorps Week project - a pilot effort created to help critique an upcoming first of its kind event: A Walk-Ability Audit. This project, led by Payal Ravani, consisted of members starting at

the capitol lawn for an explanation of the project, and then concluded with members doing a comprehensive survey of Lansing's sidewalks, including both the physical condition of sidewalks and the environmental condition surrounding them.

Between the two projects, the AmeriCorps team removed thousands of invasive species and offered much advice for how Lansing can improve their sidewalks. By doing so, Power of We Consortium's AmeriCorps members are helping improve the safety of Lansing's pedestrians, as well as the environment at large.

Stepping Up!

*By: Jillian Tremonti
4-H Mentor Michigan*

On May 8, 2010, AmeriCorps members, AmeriCorps alums, and residents from greater Lansing braved cold and rainy weather to join forces to volunteer throughout the tri-county area. During the day, Step Up Lansing hosted service hubs at different locations, where AmeriCorps members, alums, and local residents worked alongside one another, focusing efforts on important needs throughout the community.

Projects included serving breakfast and dinner at the local Volunteers of America chapter, assisting with Woldumar's Wildflower Weekend at the plant sale and art show, and helping with clean-up after the Trebuchet Days event in downtown Lansing. Participants also helped

Sierra Rose Farms with spring planting and weed pulling, cleared brush and branches at Cavanaugh Park, and various other activities.

The unfortunate weather didn't stop Step Up Lansing volunteers from spreading the word and incredible impact of service. AmeriCorps alumni from NCCC (based out of Colorado) joined up with current and former members from the 4-H Mentor Michigan Initiative AmeriCorps program, VISTA members, and members from Peckham Industries to help make Step Up Lansing a great success.

Volunteers were eager to give back to the local community and hear about



Serving breakfast with Volunteers of America.

what AmeriCorps members are currently doing or have done in the local community, throughout the state, and even the country! AmeriCorps alumni were happy to share stories of service with current members while serving alongside one another while giving back to greater Lansing residents and organizations.

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