



Volunteering—Now More Than Ever

By Dean Amel

This October I went on a volunteer vacation. In four days of work, a group of ten women and three men – most of whom knew no one else in the group – built from scratch a new 1½ mile hiking trail that connected two existing trails in upstate New York. It was hard work (my left knee and right elbow still hurt), but it was one of the most satisfying vacations I’ve had in years.

Our diverse group ranged in age from the 20s to the 60s and in demeanor from extravert to introvert, but I think the entire group enjoyed the opportunity to build something tangible and learn new skills. I know that the host organization was thrilled with the amount of work we accomplished, allowing them to open the new trail months before they thought it would be ready.

I still have our group photo, taken the morning of the first day when we were still clean, on my work computer to cheer me up after reading a particularly annoying email, and I wonder about the friends I made on the trip. Did Kai have the courage to follow her dream and move from Staten Island to New Zealand? How is Zhuyun’s new job in San Francisco? Have Chris, the local trail manager, and his dog Abby had any more sightings of the flying squirrel that landed on my stomach when Chris shook the dead tree along the trail in which it was sleeping?



I mention this trip because it reinforced for me one of the main reasons I volunteer with the Sierra Club and one of the main reasons I think you should give it a try: *Volunteers tend to be really nice people*. Our local volunteers are a mix of long-time members of our Executive Committee and people young and old who recently moved to the area or decided to become active volunteers after the 2016 election.

Barbara Swart, a long-time resident, has become a big part of our Ready for 100 campaign in Arlington. Ray Atkinson, who just moved to the area a year ago after finishing school, has taken on the position of Transportation Issues Chair, which had been vacant, and done great work on issues including bicycle trails and walkability.

But we need more help. I often get requests from local residents asking for the Sierra Club to weigh in on a local development issue or to become active in a protracted process, such as the redevelopment of the Richmond Highway corridor in eastern Fairfax County. Too often, I have to say that, with the exception of two hard-working and fully booked staff people, everyone in the Sierra Club in northern Virginia is a volunteer with limited free time. In many cases we simply don't have anyone free to cover an important issue.

If you're increasingly disgusted by the attacks on science and the environment coming from across the Potomac, I encourage you to check out our web page at <https://www.sierraclub.org/virginia/mount-vernon>. You can join our listserv to get occasional updates on local events, check out past issues of this newsletter or contact me (damel@alum.mit.edu) or another local leader and give volunteering a shot. The potential cost is a couple boring hours at a meeting that fails to inspire you, but the potential benefit is huge.

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