

Youths 'develop environmental ethics'

Six city kids work to improve Den Rock Park this summer

By ANITA FRITZ
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LAWRENCE — Groundwork Green Team is making its way through Den Rock Park this summer with its members wearing hard hats, work boots and goggles.

Six city kids, ages 12 to 16, are cutting down and trimming trees, removing weeds, picking up trash and making the park more attractive to visitors as part of an initiative of Groundwork Lawrence.

"I really like this place," said Emmanuel Espaillat, 14, who hopes to be a police officer. "Maybe I'll be an environmental officer," he said with a smile as he held his saw, ready to cut the next dead tree.

The youths were awarded spots on the team after going through an application and interview process with Groundwork Lawrence, a nonprofit organization that works outdoors with kids, teaching them about the environment and the creatures that live there.

The team includes Espaillat, Melanie Lilly, 13, Estephany Berroa, 16, Jennifer Pagan, 13, Nefty Correa, 12, and Rodolfo Morel Jr., 12, all of Lawrence. The youths began work in Den Rock on July 7 and will stay there until the end of August. Every member is paid for the jobs they do Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to noon.

"This is so good for them," said Lesly Melendez, environmental outreach coordinator for the organization. "They're getting paid, learning and having fun." She said Groundwork received 60 applications for the six slots this year.

Melendez said the group also will take field trips throughout the summer. She said they'll visit different locations in Lawrence to



MARK LORENZ/Staff photo

Melanie Lilly, 13, cuts tree branches using a hand saw as Jennifer Pagan, 13, removes trimmed branches in Den Rock Park yesterday. They are performing timber stand improvement. The teens are from Lawrence.

learn about how their city operates. Field trips will include visits to the power plant, water treatment plant and other parks throughout the city.

"I'm glad we can work out here and make the park nicer for people who visit," said Espaillat, who is spending his second summer with the team.

"I've been here with my family to relax before," said Lilly, who hopes to be an actress and singer. "Now I'm here to work and fix things. I like doing both, because it's fun to look at the scenery and relax, but it's also nice to make a difference."

Guy Shepard, the group's teacher and a licensed arborist, said each youth is expected to pick up trash as they walk through the park and place it in a bag that's disposed of each day. "We want

them to fill at least one bag a day."

He said the group spends its mornings weeding along the paths of the park, cutting grass, placing wood chips around plants, cutting dead trees and branches and will eventually plant new native plants a landscape architect plans to deliver.

"This is my first year and I'll probably apply again next year," said Berroa, who wants to be a pediatrician.

Berroa said she'll apply to the organization's other program, Lawrence Outdoor Youth Corp, next year. She said she was 15 when she applied this year so had to spend it with the Green Team. The Youth Corp, which offers the same types of opportunities to 16-through 18-year-olds, is working along the south bank of the Merrimack River this summer.

Both groups receive grants to operate. Groundwork Green Team received a grant from the city, which received money for trail work from the state this year. It also received money from the Massachusetts Environmental Trust to be used for its field trips.

"I think it's great that we're beginning to develop environmental ethics in our young people," said Tennis Lilly, chairman of the Conservation Commission. "We're teaching them the value of the environment, while teaching them to understand, respect and cherish it."