



AMERICORPS IN ACTION

by Cherie Riffey, *KDWPT AmeriCorps Coordinator*





Luke Nihart was a well-liked park ranger for Tuttle Creek State Park until his untimely passing in 2010.

Because of the impact he had on others, and his love of archery, the range pictured on the left was named in his memory.

KANSAS OUTDOOR AMERICORPS ACTION TEAM

Fifty-five – that’s how many service members, on average, the **Kansas Outdoor AmeriCorps Action Team** is comprised of each year. It’s not a large team by any stretch of the imagination, but don’t let the numbers fool you. This team takes their name to heart and when it comes to needing something done, you can bet they’ll take action.

Members commit to a set amount of hours during their time with AmeriCorps, ranging anywhere from 300 to 1,700 hours. Upon completion of their hours, members are awarded a small sum to be used only for educational expenses at a Title IV school or paying off qualified student loans. The typical AmeriCorps member is a college student completing a degree in park management, natural resource management or other environmental degrees, but members come from all walks of life.

“It’s a great opportunity for these members to get experience in their field of study,” said KDWPT program director Cherie Riffey, “and they are able to get some of the expense of college taken care of in the process.”

The Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism (KDWPT) initially teamed up with USDA AmeriCorps Program through the Natural Resource Conservation Service in 1993 as an effort to respond to damage caused by a series of floods that hit the sunflower state that year. State parks and wildlife areas desperately needed help with debris clean-up and facility restoration and outside help was a must. The program officially launched in 1995, but only lasted through 1996. The following year, the federal

program ended for a period. When more severe flooding occurred in 1998, Kansas state parks applied as an independent program for disaster response and environmental restoration. At the time, severe natural disasters were hitting Kansas and surrounding areas every year. Finally in 1999, the Kansas Outdoor AmeriCorps Action Team emerged, taking a leading role in Kansas for disaster response, environmental restoration and education.

Although initially formed as a disaster response program, the Action Team now takes on projects that run the gamut. From helping the environment and improving state park facilities, to giving educational programs and increasing awareness of invasive species, there’s no project where AmeriCorps won’t lend a helping hand.

LUKE NIHART FAMILY ARCHERY RANGE & TOWER

When one of KDWPT’s own, Luke D. Nihart, passed away, you can bet AmeriCorps was there to help. Nihart passed away as a result of an ATV accident in 2010 while working at Tuttle Creek State Park where he served as a park ranger. He was an avid archer and as a way to memorialize Nihart’s passion, an archery range and tower was built in his name.

The project began in 2009 when a local group of archers approached Tuttle Creek State Park staff about constructing an archery area. Nihart enthusiastically embraced the idea. The initial concept was to create a static target area with targets placed every 5 yards from 10 yards to 65 yards, enclosed by a simple fence. One year into planning, the design and scope of the range changed significantly with Nihart’s

Although stationed at state parks and nature centers around the state, Kansas Outdoor AmeriCorps Action Team members regularly travel to help with large-scale projects efforts, including disaster relief from tornadoes.



passing. Discussions quickly changed and plans morphed from a simple range into a shooting complex that would forever memorialize Nihart and his family. The complex would now be called the Luke Nihart Family Archery Range. Many partners emerged including Brooks Yamaha, Star Lumber, Westar and the Green Team, Kansas WildTrust, Friends of Tuttle Creek State Park, Griffith Lumber, Penny's Concrete, Kaw Valley Archery, KDWP Assistant Secretary Keith Sexson, Schwab-Eaton, and of course, AmeriCorps. The newly-formed partnerships resulted in an expanded firing line, and a covered firing line shelter, developed in part by AmeriCorps members.

Nihart's passion for archery and AmeriCorps' dedication to service continue to pave the way for others. In 2013, a local high school student approached staff about building a youth area on the range for a senior project. AmeriCorps members gladly stepped in. The youth area is now complete with sidewalks, fixed quivers, bow holders and permanent placeholders for some fun 3D critter targets also purchased for the range.

It wasn't long before another project came to fruition. In an effort to accommodate crossbow archers, a 10-foot by 10-foot elevated shooting tower was developed. Westar assisted by setting poles for the tower, and park staff along with AmeriCorps members completed the tower and expanded the fenced area. Sidewalks were also poured and target holders were built below the tower, making the range ADA accessible.

AMERICORPS HELPS HERE, TOO

Disaster Response

When EF-5 tornadoes tragically struck Greensburg in 2007, Joplin, Mo. in 2011, and Moore, Okla. in 2013, AmeriCorps was there to provide relief where possible.

In the days, weeks, and months following each tornado, AmeriCorps members deployed in groups of 8-10. They provided assistance by offering child-care services, clearing debris, operating chainsaws, removing trees, tarping roofs, covering windows, salvaging materials and personal items, sorting supplies, checking in and out other volunteers, rebuilding fences on surrounding farms to help keep cattle in, and even visiting with homeowners needing a friend to talk to.

"Our members were really great with just listening to homeowners and giving them someone to talk to," said Riffey. "A lot of people we found just needed someone to hear their story. It was their way of mentally and emotionally working through what had just happened to them and our team was glad to listen."

First Day Hikes

Sponsored by America's State Parks, the First Day Hikes program offers individuals and families an opportunity to begin the New Year with a guided hike at their local state parks. Most Kansas state parks participate in the annual event, especially those with AmeriCorps members on hand. Since the programs inception two years ago, over 300 people have participated.

"First Day Hikes offer a great way to get outside, exercise, enjoy nature and welcome in the New Year with friends and family," said Riffey. "Members are a great with promoting the hikes, leading them, and even serving hot chocolate and coffee."



AmeriCorps members join hikers at Green Recreational Trail for a 2014 First Day Hike event.

Keep It Clean Kansas

Hosted by the Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE), KDWPT, and Westar Energy, Keep It Clean Kansas is an annual volunteer state park clean up event. Each year, five select state parks participate in the one-day event, providing people with an opportunity to gain service hours, give back to their community, and enjoy the outdoors. AmeriCorps members are pros at this and gladly provide help by directing volunteers, preparing lunch, cleaning up trash, and recycling items right alongside volunteers.

Some AmeriCorps members have even held contests for volunteers, such as "Most Unique Item Found" and "Most Cans Picked Up" in order to provide some fun and friendly competition.

BECOMING PART OF THE TEAM

The Kansas Outdoor AmeriCorps Action Team is always looking for dedicated members, and you don't have to be in school or be paying off student loans to qualify. Think you can't afford to dedicate much service time? You might be interested to know that members receive a fixed, bi-weekly living allowance that isn't tied to the numbers of hours served. Think you're too old to participate? Individuals 55 or older may become members and transfer their awards to a child, grandchild or even foster child. The only requirements are that members must be at least 17 years of age, a U.S. citizen or permanent resident and have a high school diploma, GED or agree to obtain one prior to using their education award.

If you have an interest in serving on the Kansas Outdoor AmeriCorps Action Team and continuing this legacy of service, contact your local state park office for an application and to schedule an interview, or contact Riffey at (620) 672-5911.

MEMBER HIGHLIGHT

Cameron Staples, Cedar Bluff Reservoir

One of my favorite projects completed as an AmeriCorps member were the Pheasants Forever Dog Carriers used for transporting dogs during hunting activities. The Great Bend Pheasants Forever Chapter received one, double dog carrier made out of recycled oak plywood and was engraved with the Pheasants Forever logo. The Hays Pheasants Forever Chapter received two similar dog carriers, one double and one single. The single one was unique because it was made out of recycled redwood instead of oak plywood to give it a distinctive look. Designing the carriers from beginning to end enhanced my carpentry skills which will aid me in my future career in construction management.



It was a lot of fun to design and build these dog carriers with the employees at CDBP. It was nice to take a short break from our busy schedule to create something different. This project was important to me because of the reason they were created. These dog carriers were donated to the organization for auction at their annual banquets. The money raised for this project at their auctions will help promote pheasant conservation, preserve pheasant habitat, and encourage others to help donate or do their part in the Pheasant Forever organization. Finally, it taught me that the skills that I have learned at my time as an AmeriCorps member can help the surrounding community. After my time as a member, I can continue to build and donate customized projects to help a cause that will impact my local wildlife and community." ♡