

Sarah Pennington



Age: 28.
AmeriCorps service: MTEC.
Why joined: A former teacher in Connecticut, Pennington had served a year with the Michigan Civilian Conservation Corps.
What she does: After-school site supervisor at Steele Middle School during the year; summer school programs at various elementary school programs; personnel work.
Long-term goal: To be a full-time middle school science teacher.
Quote: "It's been a wonderful opportunity to spend more time with students ... to sit down and ask them: How are you doing? Sometimes as a teacher, you don't have time for that."

Thea Brown



Age: 27.
AmeriCorps service: "You Turn" program at Hackley Life Counseling for students expelled from school.

Why she joined AmeriCorps: "I just felt the need to give back to the community and give my time to teens."

What she does: Tutoring, teaches anger management and conflict resolution programs, behavioral skills.

Long-term goal: To start her own after-school program in inner-city Muskegon "because when there's no place for kids to go, it's easy to get into trouble."

Quote: "You Turn is all about second chances. I love seeing the positive transformation in kids in the program. ... It's like a calling for me."

Princess Robinson



Age: 24.
AmeriCorps service: Muskegon Family Care outreach AmeriCorps worker.

Why joined: A nursing student at Muskegon Community College, Princess applied for a spot in AmeriCorps to help with education costs and for experience.

What she does: An outreach worker at the clinic that serves low-income and uninsured clients.

Long-term goal: To complete her nursing degree. She has been offered a job at Muskegon Family Care.

Quote: "I came in here looking for a job. ... The work, the people, they touched my heart. ... It's been an exhausting, extraordinary experience."



Alyssa Merten, an AmeriCorps member, explains the soil layers of a rain garden to Alyson Clawson Jablonski at the Muskegon Conservation District. Merten was teaching a class how to create such a garden that utilizes the rainwater from a building's roof to irrigate the plants.

Chronicle photos • Anthony Sautter

'Peace Corps' at home

AmeriCorps staffers 'make a difference' in West Michigan

By Susan Harrison Wolffis
susanharrison@muskegonchronicle.com

Since October 2006, Alyssa Merten has spent her days teaching the public about pesticide and fertilizer use, how to create rain gardens and how to properly store and dispose of hazardous household materials.

Her work address is at the Muskegon Conservation District, 940 N. VanEyck — but her employer is AmeriCorps. Often compared to and called the "domestic Peace Corps," AmeriCorps is a national service program that has sent thousands of its workers into nonprofit agencies throughout the United States since it was founded in 1994. In Michigan, AmeriCorps is an initiative of the Michigan Community Service Commission.

For 29-year-old Merten, who has a bachelor's degree in science education, "it's been a pretty cool experience."

"I get to help change people's lives," she says. "How many people can say that? I'm teaching about (natural) resources that can help the environment and our communities." A member of the Michigan

Groundwater Stewardship Program, Merten is one of 35 AmeriCorps members serving throughout Muskegon County.

"We look for people who are interested in making a difference," says Angela Sullivan, who is the AmeriCorps Youth Volunteer Corps program director in Muskegon.



"This is so compelling. Look around, and you'll see AmeriCorps members making such an impact on the community." Take Autumn Jenkins, who has spent the last year working with kids at the Muskegon Family YMCA. Lakeesha Anderson has done the same through the City of Muskegon's leisure services department.

Theresa Goerbig meets and works with low-income families as an outreach worker at Muskegon Family Care in Muskegon Heights. Stefanie Roderer works with girls at Girl Scouts of Michigan Pine and Dunes, and Jeanie Mullins is part of an after-school program housed at M-TEC in Muskegon.

These are all positions that wouldn't have existed, if weren't for AmeriCorps.

Alyssa Merten, 29, AmeriCorps member



Above: Alyssa Merten spreads seeds on the rain garden.



Right: Lisa Maule digs a hole for the rain garden.

AmeriCorps

In the U.S.:
• More than 70,000 AmeriCorps members serve each year in more than 2,000 organizations.

• Since 1994, more than 500,000 citizens have served.

• Since 1994, members have earned more than \$1.2 billion to put toward their college education or to pay off student loans.

In Michigan:

• 1,380 members are serving in 361 nonprofit agencies.

• Members are in all 83 Michigan counties.

• Since 1994, more than 13,500 members have served, providing more than 18 million hours of service.

• Members have earned nearly \$37 million toward their college education or vocational training.

► **AMERICORPS** from 1C

"We can't take (away) some one else's job. We're not replacing anyone. Our goal is to meet unmet human needs," says Sullivan, who supervises 15 AmeriCorps members year-round and an additional five summer members.

By contract, AmeriCorps members — they don't like the word "workers" — are required to serve 1,700 hours annually.

For her efforts, Merten — who is married with three children at home in Montague — receives a modest \$13,000 annual stipend, as well as mileage.

The big payoff is the \$4,725 "educational reward" she earns for a year's AmeriCorps service that she can put toward student loans or future education.

"It helps, believe me, it helps," Merten says.

AmeriCorps members are limited to two years in the program, although they are eligible to serve a third year in VISTA. However, that year of service includes no educational stipend.

Equally as valuable as the monetary rewards, Merten says, is the experience gained on the job. She always saw herself as a classroom science teacher, but after working since October with adults in an alternative education setting, "I kind of like it."

"I've been able to ask myself 'What do I really like to do? How do I work best?'"

There's another plus for the aspiring teacher.

"After college, I wondered how I could set myself apart from all the other (entry-level) teachers out there?" Merten says. "Now I've had all this wonderful experience."

But at the heart of AmeriCorps — whatever the program or agency — is community service.

Jenkins, 30, of New Era "stumbled upon AmeriCorps" when she was working herself out of the "ups and downs of life."

"I had a calling to volunteer with kids. I had a social awareness I wanted to act on, but I didn't know how I could afford it," Jenkins says. "Then I heard about AmeriCorps."

As many as 150 people apply for the 15 full-time AmeriCorps positions offered through Volunteer Muskegon. Other positions, such as the Michigan Groundwater Stewardship Program, are handled on a statewide level. Individuals like Merten are assigned to specific communities from 21 different programs.

Lakeesha Anderson, 28, is an AmeriCorps worker with the City of Muskegon's leisure services department. Not only is she "getting active in the community," she says, "I'm learning how to take on a leadership role."

Still another advantage of a program that, despite being introduced to the Muskegon community in 2000, still is relatively unknown.

"I had no idea how much AmeriCorps does or what it was," Jenkins says, "but I can tell you now. If you're not part of the solution, if you're not part of giving back to the community, then you're part of the problem."

"In AmeriCorps, we're part of the solution."

Please see AMERICORPS 2C ►