

Teens Clear Homeless Encampments

By SUE PASCOE
Editor

I want to live here with these beautiful views of the ocean,” an observer said, looking out at the Pacific Ocean. “I can understand why the homeless want to live here.”

The view from L.A. City-owned property below Via las Olas down to Pacific Coast Highway is indeed spectacular. But that’s not why about 40 people assembled on the hillside on April 17-18; they were there to clean out abandoned homeless encampments.

The area below the Las Olas bluffs once served as an illegal campground for numerous homeless people. But after two brush fires broke out at encampments (one below Via las Olas, the other below Corona del Mar) and raced up the hillside toward Pacific Palisades homes, warning signs were posted in 2015: “Restricted Entry, Very High Fire Severity Zone.”

Those signs made it possible for L.A. Police Department officers to tell the homeless they could not stay.



Members of the L.A. Conservation Corps helped clean an abandoned homeless camp below the Via las Olas bluffs.

“With the signs, I could ask them to move on,” Officer John Redican told the *News*. “I would then ask them if they had help or if they wanted it.” He could connect the person with the two social workers hired by the Pa-

cific Palisades Task Force on Homelessness.

As people were cleared from the area, about 30 abandoned campsites remained—with tons of accumulated garbage.

At cleanups last fall, local residents cleared about 14 camps, but 16 remained hidden in steep terrain.

Money had been raised to clear these remaining sites, but L.A. Recreation and Parks officials said the group needed to use a City-approved contractor to finish the task. After PPTFH members met with one contractor, he came back to the group and said he couldn’t find a crew.

PPTFH members contacted Councilman Mike Bonin’s office for suggestions, and his field deputy, Lisa Cahill, said to try the L.A. Conservation Corps.

The Task Force’s Sharon Kilbride spoke

to LACC Program Manager Lorena Umana, who agreed to bring 25 youth, between the ages of 16-19, to the Palisades.

Prior to their arrival, Kilbride had identified two large encampments for the youth to clean the first day.

Upon arriving at 9 a.m., they were given instructions: “Look for needles and glass. If you come across human feces and urine, put it aside, we don’t deal with that.”

The teenagers then split into two groups, armed with rakes, shovels and gloves, and started bagging the garbage that was fouling the environment.

The *News* asked one youth if he had cleaned up encampments before. “My first one was in Watts, this is my second one,” he said, noting that this was different because it had more trash in a smaller space.

NBC Channel 4 News came to document the process and the segment was shown on the 11 a.m. and 4, 5 and 6 p.m. news programs the same day.

Within an hour, the Corps had completed cleaning both abandoned campsites, much to the amazement of Kilbride, who thought it might take two days to do both sites.

She then had Redican show the youth additional campsites.

In about six hours over two days, the youth cleared all 16 targeted encampments. By contrast, local volunteers, many of whom were in their 50s and 60s, took an entire morning to clean one site.

“Us old folks are slower than these youths,” Kilbride wrote in an April 18 email to the *News*. “The good news is that Lorena [program coordinator] will be happy to have the Corps clean up the remaining camps along Palisades Drive and the Castellammare slide area.”



Bags of trash were removed from the parkland and hauled away.



A propane tank for a barbeque was removed from one campsite.

L.A. Conservation Corps

The L.A. Conservation Corps Clean and Green program was created in 1988 for off-track middle and high school students as a workforce development program. They are paid \$12 an hour.

“We provide job training, such as showing up to work on time, in work clothes, with a lunch packed,” said Lorena Umana, program coordinator for the L.A. Conservation Corps.

In order to apply for the Clean and Green program, funded by the City of L.A. and the Bureau of Sanitation, kids have to be enrolled in school (many are in alternate schools) and show they are from low-income families.

“Our goal is not to have them here long-time,” Umana said. “We want them to complete their education and reach for something higher.” She noted that many continue with their education into college, and others will open their own business.

The Corps also has a Young Adult program that provides low-income disconnected youth (18-24) to train for and gain work experience in fields such as land man-

agement (habitat restoration and urban forestry), zero waste (recycling), construction, energy (audits and solar panel installation) and manufacturing.

Conservation Corps youth are also employed at SEA lab, located in Redondo Beach. Students give public tours, oversee fish feeding and help at the summer marine camps.

The L.A. Corps can be contacted to employ youth, if an organization needs any of the following: landscape construction, habitat restoration, irrigation installation, tree planting and urban forestry services, storm water capture and retention, graffiti removal, energy audits, community garden development and construction, native plant propagation, fire fuel reduction, invasive species removal, trail building and maintenance, urban park construction, community outreach and canvassing, environmental education and interpretation, large or small scale recycling, erosion/flood control and disaster relief.

Call: (323) 224-2550 or visit: lacorps.org.