



Groundwork Profiles

Ashante Kwon Harris

GWUSA worked with Judy Knuth Folts and Bob Fuhrmann at Yellowstone National Park (YNP) to create an opportunity for Groundwork youth to work at the Park. In addition to the extensive amount of work the youth do back in their hometowns, they get to spend a week working at YNP with Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) staff. This helps the youth connect their efforts at home to broader conservation efforts across America.

Ashante Kwon Harris, 19, arrived at the Yellowstone YCC dining hall with more energy than expected for someone who had a late evening looking for wolves. “I’ve always loved wolves,” she said, “They’re my favorite animal.” Unfortunately, the group didn’t spot any wolves that evening, but there was a particularly spectacular full moon rise and a burst of excitement when a coyote passed a few feet from the group and appeared as a silhouette on a ridge. “I just want to see more of them....more of nature in general.”

Ashante got her start with Groundwork Denver after a friend from school told her about the organization. “At first it was all about the pay,” she said matter-of-factly, “Do the job, get it done, get paid.” But working with Groundwork restoring Rocky Mountain Arsenal changed all that. Groundwork Denver received more funding this past spring to do conservation work in the Arsenal. The Trust organized teams of youth to restore four miles of riparian habitat, removed invasives on 160 acres, and collected 10 pounds of native seeds for replanting. “Rocky Mountain Arsenal used to be one of the most polluted places in the country...but it’s amazing to see what we can do if we put the environment back. That showed me right there what we can do and changed my view of nature.” Ashante raced through the list of accomplishments. “Sorry if I’m talking too fast. I get passionate when I talk about these

“MAN HAS DONE A LOT OF BAD THINGS TO NATURE...AND LITTLE BY LITTLE, WE’VE LEARNED FROM OUR MISTAKES AND WE’RE JUST NOW LEARNING HOW TO MAKE IT BETTER.” ASHANTE LOOKED AROUND THE ROOM AT THE ENERGETIC MASS OF YOUTH GATHERING FOR THEIR MORNING WORK DETAIL. “I WANT TO BE A PART OF THAT.”

things.” She paused. “Groundwork helped me to appreciate nature better and to understand why we need to take better care of it, in order for it to take better care of us.” Waving her arms toward Bunsen Peak she said “We need to realize the impact of all of this, because if it isn’t here...we’re not here.”

Ashante talked about her experience in Yellowstone. “I never thought I’d get to travel to Yellowstone....I just LOVE this place,” she said emphatically. “I never thought I’d get to see a waterfall, or see bison. I never thought I’d get to see a lake so big it looked like an ocean.” Ashante reflected for a moment. “Seeing this makes me want to travel and see more beautiful places. Don’t get me wrong, it’s not to say I don’t like city life as well, but it’s great to see creatures other than humans,” she smiled.

Ashante’s family is proud of her efforts. “My family was all for me joining Groundwork. It’s a legit job and outside work is hard, but when I come home tired at night, my family knows why.”

Ashante reflected on how more youth could be attracted to conservation work. “Adults can tell youth all day long why they need to do conservation work but it’s better if the youth hear it from their own peers. I tell people all the time about my job. It’s hard, I tell them, but rewarding. I’ve already recruited a lot of new people!” she beamed. “And to tell you the truth, I’ve already forgotten about the pay. I do it now, to do it,” she added. “It’s changed my life, my own behavior. I turn off the lights when I leave a room, I clean up around my apartment building and help maintain the landscaping. I have my own garden I help maintain over at a local elementary school.” She paused...“I never thought I’d do that....but that’s what I do now.”

Ashante went on to tell how working with Groundwork and being in Yellowstone has changed her career plans. “Seeing all of this, and doing the work we do at Groundwork makes me want to pursue this field. I want to be a park ranger and work for YCC...that’s definitely a consideration,” she says. “Before I wanted to be a doctor, because I like people and I wanted to help them get better. But now, thanks to Groundwork, I want to fix the environment because that also helps people to get better and be healthy.”

DEDICATED TO CHANGING PLACES AND CHANGING LIVES, GROUNDWORK USA, DEVELOPED WITH NATIONAL PARK SERVICE SUPPORT, IS A NATIONAL ORGANIZATION WITH LOCAL ROOTS, WORKING TO REVITALIZE NEIGHBORHOODS AND TRANSFORM COMMUNITY LIABILITIES INTO ASSETS.

