

## ENVIRONMENT



Photos by Brant Ward / The San Francisco Chronicle

# Teens greening up

Greenagers undergo rigorous process to spruce up parks, form bond with nature, hone civic and activism skills

By Jill Tucker

To the untrained eye, the small patch of land at the edge of San Francisco's Crocker-Amazon Playground looked tidy, with a row of olive trees, some patches of green ground cover and a pretty bush with purple flowers.

But the half dozen high school kids armed with gloves and garden loppers saw a lot of work to do.

They weren't just normal teenag-

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Miriam Myers, trimming an olive tree, says the Greenagers program "really opened my eyes."

Jaila Watkins, 14, gets down to business, pulling out stubborn weeds near the Crocker-Amazon Park clubhouse.

get to go camping, kayaking and work on an individual project that could include planting

Within 30 minutes the patch looked immaculate, with weeds, saplings and the overgrown

They say you reap what you sow; for Greenagers that includes a love of nature, and a cool shirt.



## Y AREA

# Greenagers see new parts of their city

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ers. They were official Greenagers, with city-issued T-shirts to prove it.

The teens were selected after a rigorous application process to participate in the Recreation and Park Department nine-month program and paid \$100 a month for three Saturdays of "beautification and habitat restoration" in city parks in the southeast neighborhoods of San Francisco.

But the program is about more than relatively cheap labor.

## Carving a path

The goal is to hone leadership and teamwork skills, and encourage stewardship and civic engagement.

In other words, they get great fodder for college applications and resumes, but also the confidence to be a player in city politics or community activism, especially when it comes to playgrounds, parks and open spaces. They also get to be outside.

"They can have a voice, they can be active and this is how you do it," said Kimberly Kiefer, the park department's director of volunteer services.

While the students learn how to trim trees, identify weeds and care for park plant life, the 12 kids currently participating in the program also get to go camping, kayaking and work on an individual project that

**"It's just fun to play with tools and pull stuff out. I kind of miss seeing grass everywhere."**

*Jeffrey Ramirez, 16,  
Lincoln High senior*

tables at city parks.

Since the program started in 2012, 36 high school students have been hired, including the current group, and only four have dropped out before the January graduation ceremony.

Those teens have provided about 2,100 hours and counting, making city parks cleaner and prettier.

Many of the alumni are working in nature-based jobs for the San Francisco Zoo, in the Marin Headlands or for the city this summer, then heading off to college in the fall.

The current crop of Greenagers is just beginning the program and only a few weeks in. The makeover on the small plot of land at Crocker-Amazon Playground was among their first few projects and an extra midweek work session.

As they pulled on the gloves, they eyed the green weeds that infiltrated the ground cover, saplings and suckers sprouting on and around the trees and the bush with purple flowers that was a bit out of control.

Within 30 minutes the patch looked immac-







Greenagers Miriam Myers (left) and Jaila Watkins take care of tree cuttings at Crocker-Amazon Park.

Photos by Brant Ward / The San Francisco Chronicle

"It's just fun to play with tools and pull stuff out," said Jeffrey Ramirez, 16, a senior at Lincoln High.

A Bayview resident, Jeffrey has worked in parks he didn't know existed before he joined the program.

"I kind of miss seeing grass everywhere," he said of his own neighborhood. "My neighborhood is really urban."

That's also a big part of the program — introducing the teens to areas of the city they have never seen and meeting other kids from different backgrounds.

#### New perspective

"Greenagers really opened my eyes and connected me to areas of the city I hadn't been exposed to before," said Miriam Myers, 17, an Excelsior resident, who participated the first year of the program. "I think you kind of live in a bub-

ble in San Francisco."

Each of the students hired for the program has to work on a project related to city parks.

Miriam started the effort to restore the chess tables at Youngblood Coleman Playground in the Bayview neighborhood.

"I feel like there's a lot more put into the parks than I realized beforehand," she said. "I think I appreciate things a little more."

Check. That's another goal of the program, said Brenda Cartagena, the park department's volunteer outreach coordinator.

"Sometimes we get youth who've never had experience in physical labor," she said. For all the kids, "it's a memorable experience."

Jill Tucker is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. E-mail: [jtucker@sfgchronicle.com](mailto:jtucker@sfgchronicle.com)