

Miles from home, CCC corpsmembers excel

A large fire such as the Whittier Fire requires a large support team to organize supplies and keep the camp clean. To ensure that the Incident Command Post at Dos Pueblos High School runs smoothly, the Incident Management Team depends on the hard work of the California Conservation Corps (CCC).



The CCC was founded in 1976 and was modeled after Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal Program, the Civilian Conservation Corps. Today's incarnation of the CCC is a year-long program for California residents between the ages of 18 and 25. The CCC's motto is "Hard work, low pay, miserable conditions ... and more!" but corps members are always ready to serve. Since its inception, 120,000 corpsmembers have participated in the CCC and have gained valuable job skills and education along the way. These young men and women typically complete several dozen projects throughout the year including trail work, native plant restoration, natural disaster relief, and much more.

Approximately 45 corpsmembers from three different CCC crews have been providing camp support for the Whittier Fire, doing jobs from running the supply center to refurbishing fire

hoses. Among these crewmembers are refugees from seven countries including Nigeria, Sudan, Burundi, Thailand, Uganda, Iraq, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Basim Almikhael, 22, is a corpsmember from Baghdad, Iraq. He and his family fled the war-torn country almost a year ago. When asked what he wanted people to know about him, he paused to reflect. "I come from a background that's really sad. We couldn't complete our education because of the situation there. It was really, really bad, but we still have the hope" said Almikhael. Now living in San Diego, Almikhael joined the CCC to gain experience and education and to build his language skills; "It's a good place to start here." After leaving the CCC, Almikhael wants to study medicine. "I'm working on myself really hard," he said. Almikhael has assumed a leadership position in his crew.

Malenga Shishim, 24, is from Kazimia, Congo. When asked what inspired him to join the CCC, he replied, "I like to help people." His favorite part of the assignment at the Whittier Fire is helping others. "We came to give support to the firefighters," he said. Like Almikhael, Shishim

sees the CCC as a great way to continue his education. “We’re still learning. We’re learning something from everyone. We work together and live together and help each other to build a team.” Shishim plans to get his high school diploma through the CCC’s educational programs and hopes to become an engineer one day.

The diversity of the crews of the CCC is one of its greatest assets, and the refugee program exemplifies that diversity. Andrae Aldrete, 29, is the Crew Leader of San Diego Crew 21. “The main value I see [of the refugee program] is it gives the staff and crew an opportunity to expand their worldview. It’s something you just don’t get in other jobs. It creates a sense of community where you can learn to appreciate all cultures.”

To learn more about the California Conservation Corps, visit www.ccc.ca.gov.