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NCCC team cleans up debris in Falls

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ROBERT L. BAKER / TIMES-SHAMROCK Patrick Skovira of Westminster, Md., was the National Civilian Community Corps team leader in Falls.

By Robert L. Baker

Since March 11, Cassandra Lewis of Niagara Falls, N.Y., has been working along the North Branch of the Susquehanna River helping with stream cleanup, mostly from debris left behind by last September's flood.

She has taken a year off from her undergraduate studies in social work to get some hands-on experience of caring for society.

Lewis is part of a National Civilian Community Corps, a subsidiary of AmeriCorps, which has been in the Falls area of Wyoming County since Wednesday and will be leaving next Wednesday for Ohio.

On Saturday, nine other NCCC members and six students from EIHAB (the former St. Michael's School) were on a mission to clean up debris that had backed up six months ago from the Susquehanna along Whitelock Creek.

"People who lost homes were so busy getting their lives back to normal that litter control really took a back seat," Erin Pierce of the Susquehanna Greenway Partnership said Saturday.

Pierce said her group partnered with the Appalachian Coal Country Team to get the NCCC team to the region, "and it has been the greatest thing."

NCCC team leader Patrick Skovira of Westminster, Md., said that starting in February and ending in November each NCCC team works in six- to eight-week blocks working on environmental, urban development and disaster relief efforts based on identified needs.

They have to give up 1,700 hours.

In exchange, the members would get temporary housing, a small monthly stipend and a \$5,000 higher education reward at the end.

Lewis said she planned to use her "reward" for future college bills, but admitted she's been getting a "real-life education" living in close proximity to nine other people and discovering what they're all capable of giving back.

She also noted that working on the Warrior Trail in Shickshinny, many in the group got a life lesson in dealing with deer ticks.

"We know what to look for and how to be prepared," she said.

Emily Groblirsch of Rochester, Minn., chuckled, "And we won't talk about the snakes."

The Susquehanna Greenway Partnership had the group previously in Bloomsburg, Berwick and Shickshinny, and like what they encountered in Falls, "the needs are enormous."

"If we made a small dent, that would be a huge success," Pierce said because people feel overwhelmed by it all.

Skovira saw the flooding firsthand, because he was on an NCCC team last year, but this year as a team leader he is seeing other after-effects, like the landscape changed with streams taking on new courses, and parks that have been left behind.

On Thursday, the team was bleaching playground equipment at the Hoch Memorial Park in West Falls because community members were planning an Easter egg hunt there Saturday.

This coming Tuesday as the NCCC local effort approaches its local end, Skovira said the young adults ages 18-24 would be having a picnic with students from EIHAB to share what it's like to give up a year of your life for a bigger calling.

"It's well worth it," Skovira, who graduated from Shepherd University in 2010, said.

"The hands-on experience, getting out in different communities, talking to different people and seeing what you're capable of is hard to match in the classroom," he said.

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