

Youth Lead the Way in Little Brook

“A lot of people don’t know about this community,” says Mark Mendez of the North Seattle neighborhood where he grew up. “They think Lake City is just white people.”

In fact, Lake City’s Little Brook community boasts a range of ethnicities and languages, and a good number of residents who are recent immigrants. It’s a densely populated, mostly low-income area with little green or open space that has been overlooked in neighborhood improvement and planning efforts—something Mendez, a community leader and youth advocate, wants to change.



Mark Mendez looks on as Youth Corps participant Ben Liu speaks about the group’s work.

Photo by Britt Le

“I was getting frustrated when I went to community meetings and there were no people of color there,” says Mendez. Empowering young people to be leaders in their own community is a solution, he says. Mendez initiated a partnership with Seattle Parks Foundation to launch the Little Brook Youth Corps, a program that trains teens age 13 to 17 to improve their neighborhood environment. The Youth Corps’ inaugural summer project was a model of collaboration that included generous funding from Kaiser Permanente, Thornton Creek Alliance, and Seattle’s Department of Neighborhoods; mentors from Lake City

Neighborhood Alliance, Thornton Creek Alliance, and DIRT Corps; and enthusiastic teens from a wide variety of backgrounds.

The brook for which the area is named runs south from the city boundary with Shoreline at 27th Avenue NE to Meadowbrook Pond. It is paved over for most of that distance, and water quality plummets once the brook surfaces in a small wooded area in Little Brook Park. Over a few days this past summer, Youth Corps members cleared brush and ivy and hundreds of branches—and collected some hypodermic syringes—to open up the area around the brook and reclaim it as public space. In an area dense with apartment buildings and just blocks from

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the traffic of Lake City Way, Little Brook Park is the only green space within a half-mile walk for nearly 4,500 residents.



Little Brook Youth Corps members.

Photo by Britt Le

The Youth Corps outfitted participants in new boots and paid a living-wage stipend in addition to providing valuable work experience. Applications to join the Youth Corps were distributed at the Lake City branch library and the local teen center, and 57 young people applied for just 10 spots.

Youth Corps participants were chosen for their leadership potential, a quality in evidence when they hosted a community event in the park at the end of their project. Fourteen-year-old Corps member Kevin Munoz spoke that evening about the value of the project, saying that he was drawn to the Youth Corps because he used to live in the

neighboring apartments and played in the park when he was younger. “It was really dirty,” he said. “So I really wanted to do something about it.”

Wearing their work boots, Corps members led a tour of the newly tidied-up brook. On a summer evening, with sparkling water and dappled light through the trees, the restored area was an idyllic spot.

Restoring more of the brook will help build community cohesion, make the neighborhood more walkable, and discourage crime. There are several places where the brook can be daylighted, the water quality can be improved, and green space can be established. One such spot is near 130th and Lake City Way at Hellbent Brewing Company, whose co-owner Jack Guinn and Guinn’s wife, Nicole Dillman, are enthusiastic advocates. In fact, Dillman reviewed all 57 Youth Corps applications and spent a week volunteering with the group, bringing along the couple’s dog, Gooley, who spent the week soaking up attention from the kids.

Youth Corps participant Kevin Munoz explains his connection to the project.

Photo by Britt Le



The Youth Corps will reconvene this fall to plant native species around the brook. It has already planted seeds for community improvement. As participant Ben Liu put it, “I hope that making this park more beautiful will lead to making more beautiful parks in Lake City. I hope that what we’re doing here will motivate other people to take action and advocate for what they want.”