



Courtesy

# Mountain Roots finds fertile ground with national service

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Times Editor

When Trisha Langenfeld graduated from Iowa State University last year, she had two goals in mind: mountains and community service.

Those desires led her to join 21 other individuals as AmeriCorps Members within Healthy Futures, a hub for the national service program coordinated by Gunnison's Mountain Roots Food Project.

While Langenfeld worked with Gunnison Watershed School District students in summer camps, her peers ran community gardens, cranked out produce at Mountain Root's farm at Coldharbour Ranch, distributed food at free farmers markets and helped organizations in Salida, Montrose and Grand Junction.

Altogether, Langenfeld and her AmeriCorps cohort served 20,000 people through Healthy Futures programs, all of which connected to improving food security.

This year is the second in which Mountain Roots has been a hub for AmeriCorps Members. The success of Mountain Roots' collaboration with the federal service program has tripled the staffing capacity of the non-profit organization, strengthened ties among community

groups across the Hwy. 50 corridor and created a foundation for more diversity, equity and inclusion going forward, said Holly Conn, Mountain Roots executive director.

"Mountain Roots has tried to grow really quickly because as soon as we came on the scene, and it's been 10 years now, the demand and the interest in all of the things we were doing just skyrocketed," Conn said.

But the burgeoning local agriculture and food justice movements did not provide a clear path to increasing the number of paid staff at Mountain Roots. Conn imagined that AmeriCorps could provide a handful of helpers each summer. AmeriCorps functions like a domestic Peace Corps program by sending service-minded young adults to work in underserved communities.

When Conn inquired in 2017 with the Colorado Lt. Governor's Office about hosting a few AmeriCorps members, she hit a roadblock: there was no homebase for members in Central Colorado and much of the Western Slope. Office staff asked if Mountain Roots would like to become that hub.

"I took a big gulp and said, 'I'll think about it,'" Conn said. "I thought if I need this help then other organizations need this help, and if we work together we can do this."

Mountain Roots hired Lyndie Bradshaw to manage the grant application that would make Mountain Roots an AmeriCorps hub under the banner of a new program, Healthy Futures. Bradshaw submitted the application in 2018, and in 2019 members of the first AmeriCorps cohort began to arrive in Gunnison.

The effect was to expand Mountain Roots' capacity quickly and for low cost. AmeriCorps members who, like Langenfeld, are often recently graduated from college, receive a living expense stipend from the federal AmeriCorps agency that totals about \$21,000 for one year of work. Mountain Roots matches about one quarter of the government funds.

"We have to explain to some applicants that this is a temporary job, that there is not a salary but rather a living allowance, and the reward is that hopefully they get a thoughtful and important experience," Bradshaw said.

In 2019 the Healthy Futures program led by Bradshaw sent members to seven sites. In 2020, Mountain Roots looked to repeat the success

at six locations: Delta County Schools, Community alliance for Education and Hunger Relief in Mesa County, Valley Food Partnership in Montrose, Guidestone in Salida, Gunnison County Health and Human Services, and Mountain Roots' various programs in the Gunnison Valley.

"Life would have been pretty normal if I had stayed in Iowa," Langenfeld said.

Instead, Langenfeld and her fellow members found themselves in COVID-19 lockdown along with the communities they had been sent to serve. It did not last long; her cohort found ways to adapt and to be part of solutions to new problems.

"We like to stay creative and nimble and flexible," Conn said.

In the Gunnison Valley's first summer with the novel coronavirus, Mountain Roots seemed to be everywhere. AmeriCorps members helped to aggregate and package produce that was handed out at free farmers markets. They broke ground on a new farm near Crested Butte South. They revived victory gardens in dozens of backyards across the valley, and they provided dozens of school children with environmental education camps at a time when traditional summer camps were limited.

There are, however, drawbacks to the typical AmeriCorps offering. Top among them is that the near-poverty pay limits who can sign up to serve in AmeriCorps. College graduates with large amounts of debt cannot opt for the low-paying job, although AmeriCorps does provide some funds that can be used to pay for higher education. Individuals with families frequently cannot take the pay cut or relocate to AmeriCorps positions.

The next step for Mountain Roots, said Conn, may be to address those shortcomings in the interest of bringing AmeriCorps members with "lived experiences" of poverty and hunger onto the team.

"Imagine how much more powerful our work could be if we had someone with the experience of food insecurity," Conn said. "Their perspective on how to solve the problem is going to be really meaningful to us."

Conn said she hopes to staff one-third of the annual Healthy Futures member slots with people who have experienced "these deeply rooted society problems" firsthand.

With the growing season over, Mountain Roots has begun to wind down for the winter, and

several of the members hired for the growing season have prepared to leave the valley.

But already three members have decided to return and serve a second tour with AmeriCorps and Mountain Roots. They'll bring with them what Bradshaw calls a "multiplier effect" of community service and new ideas for local food programs across a swath of rural Colorado.

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