



**January 7, 2011**

***Celebrating 25 Years!!***



***Bruce Saito, Executive Director***

***What led to the formation of the L.A. Corps and how did you get involved?***

Twenty six years ago me and our former executive director, Martha Diepenbrock, were both working at the CA Conservation Corps when a group of civic-minded leaders got together, looked at the success of some of the non-profit Corps that had recently begun operations, and determined that there was a need for a program providing job training and leadership skills to young people in Los Angeles. I had worked at the CCC for 10 years and I was somewhat frustrated by the state bureaucracy so when I heard that they were going to form an L.A. Corps I applied to be the Executive Director. I ended up being hired as the Program Manager, resigned from the State and started in November of 1985.

***What was the Corps like in the beginning?***

I would say sparse and fast-paced. I started in November, Martha started in January, and we opened our doors in April of '86. Our first big challenge was just getting some funding in place so that we could roll the crews out. Without any credit or history we got a loan from First Interstate Bank, and with that we were able to buy 3 vans. Then, somehow our Main Street site fell in my lap in March. We spent a month cleaning and painting, and then hired 27 kids in April. Our first projects were with the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA), CA State Parks and City Public Works. Some of them were pretty rough – one was actually a contract to remove gum at the airport parking lots. We only did that for a couple months before I gave it back. Fairly soon after we got our start it just happened that there were a number of emergencies – earthquakes and fires – that we had to respond to. These included the fire at the Downtown Central Library, where we were asked to help remove the books so that they wouldn't be damaged by the smoke and water. Our responses to these incidents really helped us get off of the ground and make a positive impression on the city.

Martha and I had to wear a lot of hats early on -- I had to meet with sponsors, develop the work, supervise the crews, make schedules, inspect the work, and conduct the training and education. But we had a good amount of early success – the largest of which was getting those twenty seven young folks in uniform and out working. I remember that we had minimal staff, tools and vehicles but that there was a lot of enthusiasm.

***What do you think were some of the turning points in the Corps' history that caused us to have the kind of presence that we do? How did the Corps growth come about?***

I think being able to respond to those emergencies in the early years really helped put our presence on the map. The L.A. Riots were a big turning point in that they brought attention to some of the social problems that we were attempting to address – namely, the lack of jobs in certain communities and the frustration arising from this. As a result, they brought new funding and kind of changed the way that we did business.

Generally, we have always looked for opportunities. They don't come by accident – they evolve intentionally and with purpose because I and the staff, and even the corpsmembers, get involved in communities and hear about programs and needs that are out there. That was the case with Clean & Green: 22 years ago we saw 2,000 kids getting out of school everyday without any extra-curricular activities to participate in so we said, "Why don't we think of things for them to do?" We started simple and said to 25 junior high kids that "if you do your homework with us we'll take you on a camping trip." At the time it wasn't intended to be gang diversion or job training, but then Mayor Bradley supported the program and it became Clean & Green. I think we have had a fairly easy time finding individuals and organization willing to either take a chance or make an investment in us because we've developed a reputation of being able to respond effectively to the needs of the community and are always there to follow up and fulfill our commitments. This has been crucial to much of our program growth.

***What were some of your proudest moments with the organization?***

Every year the Russell Kantor Scholarship Fund luncheon is the highlight of the year for me. Every high school graduation, Brownfields or LEAP graduation is also a highlight. My most recent highlight was going to the college graduation of Lucy Gutierrez, whose been with us 17 years and started as a corpsmember. She's been going to school at the University of Phoenix for the past ten years and she finally got her B.A. this past summer. Lucy is one of thousands of success stories and examples that motivate me every day.

***What's your proudest moment?***

I got married nine years ago to Alex Torres, the love of my life.

***What do you think the Corps' greatest successes and challenges have been in your time as Executive Director?***

I think that both our greatest success and challenge has been sustaining – and growing, albeit only slightly – the organization despite the tough times we're facing. We have built the Corps up to this point and I'm driven to continue operating at this threshold. I think that's a huge challenge.

***What do you see in the Corps' future?***

We've gotten over a lot of the bumps in the road and, going forward, are going to spend a lot of time on sustainability and capacity building initiatives. I also think that although needs are greater and more intense with regard to both youth employment and environmentalism, in California organizations and sponsors are becoming more receptive to developing good, sound environmental projects. We've positioned ourselves to be very involved in some of these green industry and green job training opportunities when they become available.

Long term, I would like to see the Corps achieve greater coverage of the Southern California area, increase our corpsmember development programming and get our Education Programs on more solid footing.

**Young Adult Corps**

On Christmas Eve, the Corps went out to Pomona to respond to a small land slide at the connector ramp from the 57S to the 10E. About 3 civic yards of heavy soaked soil came down at the end of the ramp abutment, landing just one foot away from the number 1 lane on the shoulder area. This created a potential hazard to the public traveling East on the 10 freeway. We are proud of the following corpsmembers and Staff who picked up their phones on Christmas Eve and reported to work without hesitation: Josue Soto, Richard Larios, Daniel Cervantes, Jasan Givens, Roni Reed, Martin Gonzales, and

Veronica Romero. The crew moved heavy mud, built a dike of about 100 sand bags, and set plastic shedding to protect the eroded slope in an area of high speed traffic. Everyone did a fantastic job and returned home safe. The aforementioned corpsmembers worked hard and served as a reminder that we are fortunate to have dedicated people working at the Corps; it was a perfect example of team work and unity for one mission.



*Corpsmembers working to clear the ramp from the 57S to the 10E*

This week corpsmembers attended the first ever water efficiency job training program in partnership with Generation Water and the Worker Education Resource Center. Corpsmembers learned about the water cycle, watersheds, soil types, water quality testing, irrigation and sustainable landscaping. On Wednesday, corpsmembers got to go on a special field trip to the LA River with Miguel Luna to learn how to test the water quality of the river. The corpsmembers are becoming water efficiency experts!



*Water efficiency job training class learning about soil types*



*Miguel Luna educating the students about the importance of clean water*

Work continued along the Elysian Valley Bike Path, a project for the MRCA (Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority). Corpsmembers began the irrigation phase of the project this week and installed a main line pipe by digging a trench 24" deep and over 400 linear feet long. Corpsmembers also prepared portions of the work site for the installation of outdoor exercise equipment meant for future use by local joggers and walkers using the bike path. Work will continue for the next two weeks. Corpsmembers are receiving training in concrete forming, basic irrigation installation, chainsaw work, and power tool use.



*Andy Diaz, Jeffrey Scott, Alicia Johnson, and David Sanchez preparing for installation of equipment*



*Gardenia Romero, Jaime Llamas, and Alicia Johnson installing the main line pipe*

### **Generation Green**

EcoAcademy's Generation Green has been selected to attend the 2011 International Plastic Pollution Summit! Algalita Marine Research Foundation (AMRF) announced earlier this week the school teams

that have been selected to attend the 2011 Plastics Are Forever International Youth Summit to be held March 11-13, 2011 in Long Beach, California. We are very excited that EcoAcademy's Generation Green will be 1 out of 30 teams (representing 14 countries) that will be attending!

Generation Green won a bid to attend the comprehensive educational program designed to engage, mentor, and activate youth leaders across the United States and abroad in developing and launching action-oriented solutions to reduce plastic waste in their home communities.

"We had the pleasure of reviewing the work of more than 250 students and were wholeheartedly impressed by the outstanding research, planning, and creativity displayed by all," stated Marieta Francis, Algalita's Executive Director. "The level of competition was remarkably high and demonstrated impressive insight, fascinating approaches, and illuminating perspectives. The applications provided us with a preview of the stellar leadership certain to be displayed at the Youth Summit." Congratulations Generation Green!



*EcoAcademy's Generation Green students*

### **Clean & Green**

On Thursday, we kicked off the 2011 Clean & Green session. An excited and motivated group of young people arrived early in the morning for their first day of orientation. Program Director, Irene Lopez started the morning with a welcome speech. Afterwards, the C&G supervisors got the kids warmed up by doing some exercises. The kids took part in team building activities, tool orientation, safety procedures, and field studies/service week.



*Program Director, Irene Lopez, welcoming the new Clean and Green group*