



April 28, 2011

Tomorrow is our 25th Anniversary Luncheon!



Please join us at the Lost Angeles State Historic Park as we celebrate 25 years of success & honor our Russell Kantor Scholarship recipients!

Celebrating 25 Years!



Martha Diepenbrock, the Corps' first Executive Director

How did you become involved in the founding of the LA Corps?

Much like Bruce, prior to working for the L.A. Conservation Corps, I had been working with the California Conservation Corps for a number of years. I had recently left the CCC to assist in some activities in New York City and organize a series of events that would allow local corps and state corps to learn from one another. In the midst of this I learned that a Corps was going to be started in LA. I was immediately interested because it sounded like a great opportunity to take what I had learned at the state-level from the CCC and apply it to a more local, community-based program.

What do you remember the Corps being like in the beginning?

I remember our early years being exciting and challenging. In the beginning Bruce and I were working out of the AFL-CIO offices because its head was on our board of directors. With the assistance of Mickey

and the board we began looking for space and partners. As soon as we began work an opportunity to get a little money from the CCC arose but the money had to be spent by June '86. In February we made the decision to go for it – although we were not quite ready. We quickly found the firehouse [our 2824 S. Main St building] – which was boarded up at the time – and made arrangements to secure it. We only had about \$20K in the bank but with Bruce's connections we hired our 1st staff members, Arturo Rodriguez and Roberto Duarte, and then we had to start recruiting corpsmembers right off of the bat. By April, all of our programming was ready to go and we opened our doors to our first three crews. Our first major contract had us clearing brush and improving access to power lines for the DWP.

I still think it's pretty remarkable that we were able to begin working that quickly considering that in January we had no staff, facilities, tools, vans, uniforms or programs. In the beginning it was clear what we were trying to do so what we had to figure out was how to actually execute it. Fortunately we had the benefit of our CCC experience and connections so the learning curve wasn't that steep initially. That first year was a hustle but it was really fun.

What were some of your favorite projects from those early years?

One of my favorite projects was actually our Maple Park project, paid for by our first Bottle Bill funds; it ended up being a kind of Clean & Green pilot program. Its development was very much in line with the exciting, bustling spirit of the Corps' early days – we actually didn't even get to finish our first session of the program before it was turned into Clean & Green. One day we got a call from the Deputy Mayor telling us to come to the Mayor's office. I'm glad I answered the phone because I thought he was just going to make an offer to the first youth organization available. When we got to city hall, we were told that the City was really interested in our work but wanted to expand it to junior-high kids. We let them know that had already been running such a program at John Adams, which was right across the street from us, and agreed to a partnership soon after. This program, and the way that we got the older corpsmembers to take on a leadership role with the middle-schoolers were a very big deal for me.

Another of my favorite endeavors was our first neighborhood planting with Tree People, which was headed by Andy Lipkis, one of our Board Members at the time. We took some of the ideas and values from their organization, and reconfigured them for our population and the inner-city neighborhoods we were working in. In the process I think we forged a new approach to urban forestry in these neighborhoods that emphasized volunteering and community involvement.

Also, our responses to the floods, earthquakes and the civil unrest during the early 1990's all stand out. During the floods we were at the City Council in boots and rain gear, waiting for the council to approve Clean & Green flood relief work. The second we received approval we went straight to work.

The last thing I want to mention is our early training program. In the beginning, Leslie Bourne, who was in charge of all our early trainings and who now owns her own outdoor leadership development company, would take each group of new corpsmembers into the wilderness and put them through leadership and team building activities. Eventually we realized that we probably needed to invest a bit more in developing our crewleaders, so we weren't able to continue to train every new cohort that way. Leslie continued to conduct trainings in the desert with corpsmembers once they had been with us 6 months, though.

How did the Corps develop early on and what were some of your major challenges?

Overall I guess what I feel was important about how we operated was we had fun, got along and had a great team. We really created a safe and comfortable environment for corpsmembers that allowed them to fully take advantage of the opportunities we were offering. There were a lot of challenges early on but they had a positive impact on our program development because they pushed us to innovate, try new things and not get caught up in a "the way we've always done it" mentality. Instead we asked "how could it be better" and tried to make changes to our programs based on the feedback we were getting from our corpsmembers. One great example was our Young Adult Corps program at Main St. In the beginning we were having some trouble keeping corpsmembers enrolled in the program and getting them to finish their high school degree. We engaged the corpsmembers directly about this and our conversation led to our adopting a schedule that followed every week of school with a week of work.

Bruce and I were creative and strategic around both the needs and opportunities that came about. Our mission has always been creating opportunities for the corpsmembers to gain experience while meeting needs in their communities. Early on, though, most of the work we were receiving was out in the hills rather than their neighborhoods. Bruce and I had to work to secure funding and create local projects that would resonate more strongly with our corpsmembers and meet local needs. Our Urban Forestry program stands out as an example of this. It began with us assisting on tree plantings that weren't in South or Central Los Angeles but we used our Bottle Bill funds to bring plantings to these neighborhoods. Another one of our most successful early attempts at meeting local needs was our disaster response program. In the days after the Northridge earthquake we would just ask corpsmembers "What did you see on your way to work and where should we go?" In those first few days after the quake L.A. didn't really have the infrastructure necessary for a large-scale response, so we were desperately needed for emergency response in these communities.

What have you been doing since your time with the Corps? How does it relate to your early work with the Corps?

After leaving the Corps, I did some technical assistance and support for the AmeriCorps programs and Conservation Corps in other parts of the Corps Network. After this I traveled to the Philippines under the auspices of the Peace Corps to talk about Youth Corps – which was great experience. I also went back to school and got a Masters in Public Administration and did some work with a few different non-profits in the areas of service, volunteerism and youth sports. Lastly, I founded a charter high school.

My work continued to focus on youth and young adults. But it wasn't as much fun – even though it was very challenging! I think what I missed – until I began working on the charter school – was the presence of young people and the dynamic and unique nature of a Conservation Corps as a place to work.

Seeing what the Corps has become since I left is incredibly powerful for me. I take great pride in its development and the role that I played in its history.

LA River Cleanup Day

Join the LA River Corps and Clean & Green as they work with Mayor Viallaraigosa and FOLAR to clean up the LA River on April 30th from 9am to noon. For more details visit the [FoLAR website](#).

Clean & Green

Check out this [article](#) about Clean & Green students visiting Death Valley National Park for a week of service, environmental education, and job shadowing with the National Park Service staff!