



American Canyon teen working at summer camp, learning lessons in the great outdoors

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[By Tony Burchyns](#)

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On a foggy day in the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, Coastal Camp counselor Virginia Delgado recently told her campers to keep an eye out for rare gemstones buried in the sand.

"If you find a carnelian stone, make a wish and put it back," the 19-year-old American Canyon resident told the campers.

Not every summer job is like this.

Delgado, a 2008 St. Patrick-St. Vincent High School graduate, and sophomore at San Francisco State University, is a camp counselor at the Headlands Institute in the rugged splendor just north of the Golden Gate Bridge.

She's also trying to make a difference this summer break in U.S. environmental policy.

On July 23, Delgado participated in an interactive youth seminar that is part of President Barack Obama's "Great Outdoors Initiative."

She was one of about 100 camp counselors and field science educators to attend the Berkeley seminar, which focused on ways to connect more Americans to nature, restore and conserve natural resources and engage in public and private partnerships to meet these goals.

It's a cause she believes in deeply, beginning with a visit as a sixth-grader to the Headlands Institute in Marin County.

That visit with her American Canyon Middle School biology club was her first experience in an environmental education program.

Delgado said it brought her face to face with nature in a way she never expected.

"I didn't have to go far to see a delicate ecosystem," she said. "It's right in our backyard."

Along with her classmates, she said she was able to learn about and explore tide pools in the institute's marine lab, explore plant life and complete a four-mile hike to the Point Bonita Lighthouse -- all opportunities she'd never had as a kid growing up in an urban area in a middle-class household.

She was hooked.

"I had the greatest time ever. I talked about it so much when I got home."

Delgado wants to ensure that more students in low-income areas, like the one where she grew up, have that opportunity.

She's studying environmental policy in college (part of a double major with urban planning) and said the Obama "listening tour" "was a great opportunity for me."

"It gave youth a chance to really speak directly to the president through video about what needs to be done so far as environmental justice," Delgado said. "That's what I want to do in my life, create policy."

Representatives from each group were asked to talk on a video that would be directed toward Obama.

Delgado volunteered.

"No one raised their hand, so I thought, why not?" she said.

This summer is Delgado's third stint at the secluded Headlands Institute, housed in old Army barracks near a former Cold War nuclear missile site. (The institute's nonprofit parent organization, NatureBridge, is based in San Francisco.)

But it's Delgado's first time as a counselor for Coastal Camp, the institute's youth summer program.

Previously, Delgado was a teen intern for her entire senior year of high school, giving up her spot on the volleyball team and gaining first-hand knowledge about the field of environmental education.

The experience inspired her to work to increase accessibility for all students to field science programs, "not just people in affluent areas."

"I know Vallejo kids will love these opportunities," Delgado said. "But when you don't offer them, it creates a mindframe that backpacking and environmental organizations are for other people, not us. But it should be available for everyone. It belongs to all of us."

Expanding access for all students is one of the institute's goals, Director Aaron Rich said. But bringing down the price can be difficult.

Coastal Camp costs \$345 a week. And full price for the overnight school field trips is \$240 per student for three days and \$380 for five days.

Currently, no Vallejo schools are participating, even though some scholarship opportunities exist.

"Thirty-five percent of the children who come through our programs are on some kind of scholarship," Rich said.

NatureBridge serves about 40,000 students on its four campuses. The other sites are in Yosemite National Park, Olympic National Park in Washington and the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area.

In the last 12 years, the organization has raised \$10 million to help students from low-income areas attend its field science program, Rich said.

"Our goal is to be representative of the population we are serving," Rich said, adding that schools from Sacramento to San Jose book field trips.

In the past, Vallejo's M.I.T. Academy has participated.

Reaching out to schools is a two-way process.

Often it's up to individual teachers to determine what field trips their students take, said Cherri Summers, chief academic officer for the Vallejo City Unified School District.

There are no districtwide field trips, Summers said, "but there is districtwide science curriculum."

For example, Summers said, fourth-graders study how plants and animals make up ecosystems and fifth-graders have a unit on water conservation.

"And hands-on programs at Loma Vista Farm are available to all elementary school students in the district," Summers said.

The more hands-on learning, the better, said John Conant, a field science educator at the institute, who works with teachers bringing classes on field trips.

"We take the students and we essentially are educating them about science," he said. "But instead of cracking open a book, they are getting out there and they are getting involved in it."

For kids who can't learn through listening or reading, they can learn with their hands, Conant said.

"And a lot of the kids just don't get outside and away from pavement very often," Conant added. "So we're taking care of that, too."

Ally Kushin, Coastal Camp's director and the institute's family programs manager, said the majority of students who experience the headlands do so on field trips.

When classes come out for the field science programs, teachers can request certain themes like geology or natural history, and the field science educators create a program around that theme.

"We call it their outdoor classroom," said Ally Kushin, Coastal Camp's director and the institute's family programs manager.

"They are following the (teaching) standards and going out with their teachers along with an educator."

When Delgado's class visited, she didn't know what to expect.

"But then when we met our educators, I felt a part of something," Delgado said. "I felt, wow, these people are so enthusiastic and eager to teach."

It certainly made an impression.

Delgado's not sure what the future will bring. Or what will come out of Obama's initiative.

But after college, she plans to apply to grad school for environmental law, although she's not sure if she wants to be a lawyer.

"I really want to work in urban environments," Delgado said. "Parks like these are nice, but we need to realize we need to take care of our own environment as well, so far as pollution, air quality, just having our (community) parks be safe and green."

Contact staff writer Tony Burchyns at tburchyns@timesheraldonline.com or (707) 553-6831.