



# SAGA Crew at Mole Harbor

By Teresa Haugh, Editor

The sounds of hammering and chattering permeated the air the on Admiralty Island cross-island canoe trail. Although it was early in the morning, the trail crew at Mole Harbor had already eaten breakfast, tidied their camp site, secured their food (it's brown bear country), donned their mosquito netting and hardhats, and hiked to their work site.

I hurried to catch up. I had been invited to the island by Wilderness Field Manager John Neary to see how our Economic Recovery funds were being put to good use. We were joined by Joe Parrish, Director, Southeast Alaska Guidance Association (SAGA), who filled our floatplane with the irresistible smells of hot pizza that he brought for his crew. On the way to Mole Harbor, we landed and picked up Forestry Technician Robert Marek, who oversees the work crews on Admiralty.

Since 1986, the Forest Service has been a partner with SAGA to fill the gap created by the loss of

the Youth Conservation Corps and Young Adult Conservation Corps in the Tongass National Forest. SAGA is a non-profit organization whose mission is to improve lives, lands, and communities in Alaska through service learning. This summer, bolstered by Economic Recovery funds, the Forest Service has been able to employ up to three SAGA crews on the island at a time.

I met seven young adults on one SAGA crew. They traveled from all over the U.S. to work in Alaska. Paul Kastler, a civil engineering student from the University of Colorado in Boulder, found out May 23 that he had a job in Alaska, but had one week to move and get there. "I just had time to grab some gear and jump on a plane," he said. The crew's engineering skills became obvious as they explained the process for digging holes in the mud, removing rocks, placing and leveling logs, and topping them with stringers, sills, and puncheons (all types of framing used in the trail reconstruction.)

The puncheons, which are heavy planks, were planed and cut at Hoonah's Icy Straits Lumber and brought in by floatplane. The rest of the materials were created the old-fashioned way.

"Anybody can learn how to use a chainsaw," they told me, proud of the primitive skills they had gained.

"It's easy to build if you have an electric drill." All their holes were hand drilled.

Since they were working in a designated wilderness area, they did not use chainsaws, ATVs, or wheelbarrows. The puncheons were carried to the work site in 60-pound bundles on backpack frames; over 50% of the body weight of one diminutive crew member. Neary and



Robert Marek and Mark Wagner

Parrish helped by hauling load after load of puncheon during their stay. The crew packed in buckets of gravel used to fill in mud holes. Each evening, after working all day, the crew cleaned their Pulaski's and shovels in the stream, and sharpened their saws, hatchets, and axes.

The SAGA crew said they had gained an appreciation for the people who pioneered Alaska. While the crew used primitive tools, they were grateful for the technical gear they had in tents, sleeping bags, bug nets and rubber boots.

Crew member Chavala Kondor had looked for an AmeriCorps position in her home state of New York.



Joe Welsh



Elizabeth McLaurin

To please her parents, she also applied to work in Alaska as a backup plan. Alaska panned out. “The hard work I imagined,” she said. “The rain, not so much.” She quickly bought new rain gear after she arrived. Back home, her college interdisciplinary studies were weighted largely in the humanities, and she speaks fluent Spanish. She would like to work with immigrant refugees one day, or “A job at the UN wouldn’t be bad.”

Sara DeLeo, from Massachusetts, said she got a job after college working in the aviation industry. Since flying private jets is a luxury business, it suffered with the collapse of the economy. “I lasted for a year before I was cut,” she said. “Ironically, economic recovery funds gave a new job to someone who lost their job. And I’m learning new skills.”

Sara Nieft, from Wisconsin, pounded nails nonstop while she talked about sea kayaking for the first time in Alaska. She was amazed by the wildlife, and marveled at seeing whales and sea otters right off the beach. She would like to stay in Juneau for a while to sample the winter skiing and snowboarding. “And maybe see what it’s like to work on a fishing boat,” she said.

Mark Wagner served as team leader and mentor to the first-timers on the crew. I spoke with him about the Forest Service mission, the fact that many Forest Service employees will soon reach retirement age, and the necessity and



*SAGA Crew Elizabeth McLaurin, Joe Welsh, Chavala Kondor, Paul Kastler, Sara DeLeo, Sara Nieft, and Mark Wagner. Photo by Joe Parrish.*

desirability of connecting his generation with government careers in natural resources. Mark said, “The great thing about this job—besides helping others become more confident in their skills—is making connections. I got an internship with the Forest Service by working through the Utah Conservation Corps.” Mark is hopeful his SAGA experience will continue to open a career path to do the kind of work he loves.

Like Mark, Elizabeth McLaren, or “Liz” is an experienced worker. Through her previous stint on a fire crew in Utah, she became an expert at using a chainsaw. She showed her adaptability to working in the wilderness, however. She stripped the



*“K&K Construction”: Chavala Kondor and Paul Kastler*

bark off a tree using an ax, and put her muscles to use on the cross saw that felled it.

Joe Welsh is known as the “funny one” with a sense of humor. Although Joe came from North Carolina, he found that he loves the west and the Pacific Ocean. His dream is doing trails work on an island in Hawaii.

The work and conversation of the crew buzzed through the day. Paul admitted, “We can get pretty philosophical out here.”

Besides an occasional swear word that came out when a notched log didn’t come out level, or a boulder blocked the path, I heard:

“I like salmon berries better than raspberries.”

“That pizza last night was the best I ever had.”

“I’m eating steak when I go to Anchorage. And Mexican.” (Food was a popular topic.)

“It’s either be wet from the rain or wet from the sweat.”

“Hold the ax safely, move your feet.”

“Can you believe I’m still digging?”

“Come on bug, not up the sleeve!”

“When I leave here I wear polka-dotted high heels—black with little bows on the front.”

At the end of a long day, as I turned to walk down the trail to meet the floatplane, I called out my thanks and appreciation to the crew. I heard a voice say, “You’re welcome, if you need anything else, contact my agent.” I smiled, knowing her hardy work ethic was the best agent she could ever have.