

Groundwork Hudson Valley's Youth Program: Transforming Lives and Restoring Habitat

By Caty Fortin, Climate Resilience Program Associate



The Green Team with willow cuttings ready to be planted in a river restoration site. The new trees will help stabilize the river bank and provide habitat for wildlife.

One of the greatest challenges of the environmental movement is that many of the communities who take the greatest toll of environmental degradation, such as low-income urban communities, are oftentimes exploited for the activism discourse; or they simply do not have the capacity to focus on environmental issues while trying to make ends meet. One organization based in Yonkers, NY, is trying to face this challenge. Groundwork Hudson Valley's mission as an environmental justice non-profit is to create sustainable environmental change in urban neighborhoods through community-based partnerships that promote equity, youth leadership, and economic opportunity.

Each year, we work to restore vacant properties; improve water quality in local streams; and build trails, parks, and playgrounds. We engage community members in all our work—with a particular focus on

young people. Our flagship youth development program gives Yonkers high schoolers productive opportunities to create a better Yonkers and a better New York. The group, called the Green Team, is an environmental job-training and leadership program focused on conservation projects in Yonkers and surrounding municipalities.

The Green Team is a nationally acclaimed program for underserved Yonkers Public High School students. In addition to environmental education, Green Teamers are trained on essential workforce skills, technical skills, leadership training, and soft skills.

A large portion of the Green Team's field work takes place throughout the Saw Mill River Watershed, where they remove invasive species and plant native ones. The planting of natives trees and shrubs supports local pollinators, insects, and animals, which promotes a healthy and biodiverse ecosystem. Another goal of the Green Team's efforts is to address the widespread impacts of flooding and extreme heat due to climate change through green infrastructure solutions. One of the Green Team's river restoration sites, in partnership with the National Fish and Wildlife Service, has been cultivated over the last three years. It is a site of significant flooding, especially in the wake of Hurricane Ida. The site has had three rounds of planting with new willow trees and other native species. The benefits of the trees for flooding, shade, biodiversity, and climate resilience, once fully grown, will be felt for generations.

The Green Team members' work transforms not only themselves, but also their communities, and the local environment. There is no limit to the positive impact of the program, and in recent years it is only growing in its size—from 20 to 30 students—and scope—with an added push for green infrastructure training and projects, in partnership with Groundwork Elizabeth in NJ. The purpose of the Green Team is to take all of these passionate high school students, give them these experiences and skills, and empower them in this work and in their communities. This effort creates a ripple effect. Through their work as river stewards, the Green Team expands their geographic reach upstream, leading the restoration of the river's floodplain, spreading their knowledge and skills to numerous communities all throughout the watershed, and inspiring them to take action themselves, as part of a watershed community which crosses municipal, age and socioeconomic lines.



The Green Team discovers a ladybug larva!