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**green|spaces' workforce development program relaunches under new
AmeriCorps partnership, program evolution**

(CHATTANOOGA, Oct. 20, 2020) – green|spaces' Build It Green Program (BIG) is celebrating the launch of its first class this month as an official Opportunity Youth Service Initiative (OYSI) site and The Corps Network partner.

In 2018, green|spaces recognized the need to help at-risk young adults and the opportunity to connect them with careers in construction and energy service related areas. Through funding provided by the Southeast Sustainability Communities Fund, the program was modeled after S.E.E.D., which is based in Knoxville TN.

Since then, green|spaces has graduated over 50 individuals who have gone into a variety of careers. Today, the program has expanded to a six month or one year workforce development program focused on not only job readiness, but also community organizing, outreach, and leadership training.

"The program has quadrupled in overall time commitment — for students and for us — which means we can assist more limited income individuals through home weatherization but also provide hands to assist with improvement projects at other non-profits and around the community," said program director Christian Shackelford. "It provides a living stipend and trains them for construction work, volunteer work for nonprofits, weatherization needs for homeowners, and other community work."

The new partnership with The Corps Network also means program participants receive a larger stipend to match the increased work hours, plus a new educational stipend at the end, allowing for a wider range of pathways for graduates to post-secondary training or certifications, Shackelford said.

While the program has grown and shifted to accommodate COVID-19 safety precautions in addition to the structural growth this year, at its core, the mission is still the same, he added.

"This is about more than just job training," said green|spaces Executive Director Michael Walton. "Since 1939 when redlining was established in Chattanooga preventing black and other minority families from receiving home loans, the racial wealth gap in Chattanooga and the United States has expanded over ten fold even after redlining was outlawed in 1968. Most people's wealth is in their home, so if we give people the skill set to be able to improve a home and make it more energy efficient, that is one of the most direct paths to increasing wealth and resilience."

The new program also allows for past students to come on board as mentors and trainers, providing additional opportunities to grow into peer mentorship and leadership roles.

“The AmeriCorps education stipend sets them up for a first step in a process of career building, whereas before we had more emphasis on employment after graduating rather than additional education opportunities. Now they will be able to afford to get a technical, associates, or undergraduate degree.,” Shackelford said. “There are more options now.”

Lebron Nash, a new BIG program participant, said that while he was skeptical about the program at first, he has already found how much he enjoys the process of creating.

“I love it. It’s not boring. ... I like to get things done on the first try but I made myself be patient and over time it’s getting so much better. Like today, we got into teams and built a small model house. I’m loving everything we’re doing right now.”

The program came into place at the perfect moment too, he said, explaining that he had a rough summer watching his mother face complications from COVID-19 from afar.

“It came at a good time in my life,” he said. “I feel like after this program is done ... I don’t want to be stuck where I’m at. If I didn’t have this program I’d still be trying to figure that out. Life’s been bumpy especially lately, but I know I can’t keep doing the same stuff. I’ve just been able to focus on this work so I can make my life better.”

Creating opportunity is what OYSI is all about, said The Corps Network President Mary Ellen Sprenkel.

“America’s young people are full of passion and talent, but the playing field isn’t level. The Corps Network started the Opportunity Youth Service Initiative with a vision of addressing the barriers many people face by empowering them with the support, education, and training,” she said. “... We can’t do this work without organizations like green|spaces. We are proud to have green|spaces in our network and look forward to working with them to help address issues of equity and expand access to rewarding jobs in the growing conservation and resource efficiency fields.”

Build it Green is now supported through the generous donations from the Lyndhurst Foundation, Benwood Foundation, AmeriCorps OYSI and the Corps Network, City of Chattanooga, Hamilton County Commissioner Tim Boyd and individuals. The program was honored to receive the Governor’s Environmental Stewardship Award for Outreach and Education in 2020.

For more information about Build it Green, visit:

<http://www.greenspaceschattanooga.org/build-it-green-amicorps-oysi>

About AmeriCorps Opportunity Youth Service Initiative:

Launched in 2013 through an AmeriCorps grant, The Corps Network’s Opportunity Youth Service Initiative (OYSI) is designed to provide education and conservation service experience to young people experiencing barriers (e.g. poverty, unemployment, past court involvement, physical or learning disability). During their term of service, OYSI Corpsmembers develop job skills, earn certifications, complete their high school requirements, and receive assistance in transitioning to postsecondary education or the workforce. Upon completion of their term of service, Corpsmembers receive a Segal AmeriCorps

Education Award.

<https://corpsnetwork.org/our-impact/programs-initiatives/opportunity-youth-service-initiative/>

About The Corps Network:

Established in 1985, The Corps Network is the National Association of Service and Conservation Corps. TCN's 130+ Corps provide young adults and veterans the opportunity to serve on projects on public lands and in rural and urban communities. The Corps Network supports Corps by advocating on their behalf, providing access to funding and project opportunities, and by offering expertise in Corps operations and programming. Every year, The Corps Network's efforts enable more than 22,000 diverse young people and recent veterans to strengthen communities, improve the environment, and transform their lives through service in Corps programs. <https://corpsnetwork.org/>

About green|spaces:

green|spaces is a local nonprofit focusing on facilitating connections between communities — with a focus on sustainability and strengthening Chattanooga. Our wide range of programs have one common mission: To promote living, working and building in a way that enhances our city economically, socially and environmentally.

To learn more about green|spaces, visit <http://www.greenspaceschattanooga.org/>.

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