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- Courtesy photo

By the numbers...

AmeriCorps VISTA members in the UCAN Coalition, between Sept. 16, 2007 and Sept. 15, 2008:

- Generated \$89,321 in cash resources through grant writing, fundraising activities and donations
- Brought in \$37,534 in in-kind resources
- Engaged 340 community volunteers who donated 2,765 hours of volunteer service.

AmeriCorps VISTA members make a home in Douglas County

[CARA PALLONE](#),

Gabe Engeland was a suit-and-tie kind of guy for five years.

His job in sales and marketing wore at him a little each day.

“I think I knew it all along but it came as a realization, not only was it something I didn’t want to be doing,” Engeland said. “I just couldn’t do it any longer.”

In April of 2008, Engeland and his girlfriend, Amanda Ostrander, packed up their dog, hooked a station wagon to the back of a Chevrolet Impala and cruised from Michigan to Canyonville.

When he pulled into the small Southern Oregon town, his first feeling was one of relief.

“My second reaction was, ‘Where is everybody at?’” he said.

Google Earth and Wikipedia couldn’t prepare Engeland and his girlfriend for the remoteness of South Douglas County.

“I came here directly from Lansing, which is the capital of Michigan, and prior to that, I lived in Detroit for five years,” Engeland said. “So Douglas County – and Canyonville in particular –there’s no way it could have been more opposite.”

He and Ostrander were set up in a watchman’s tower, or a small trailer, just outside of Canyonville in the Alder Creek Children’s Forest.

Moving West was just the beginning of the journey. The 29-year-old had signed up to make positive changes at his new home as an AmeriCorps VISTA member.

It’s a decision that Engeland can honestly say, nearly a year later, he hasn’t regretted for a minute.

Community service

AmeriCorps VISTA is a national service program that was founded as Volunteers in Service to America in 1965 and

incorporated into the AmeriCorps network of programs in 1993.

AmeriCorps is a program of the Corporation for National and Community Service, which is the funding source for sponsors such as Roseburg's Umpqua Community Action Network VISTA Coalition. There are 19 members now serving at host sites in Coos, Josephine and Douglas Counties. Fourteen of the members work in Douglas County.

Jane Larsen is the project coordinator for the coalition, which began in Douglas County in 2003 with six members. Since then, 57 VISTA members have served with the team. Once members are recruited through the national Web site, they are assigned to different host sites, such as the Phoenix School, Project Literacy and the Boys and Girls Clubs of the Umpqua Valley.

The VISTA members come from all over the country. Larsen said most of them are recent college graduates who are trying to build their resumé, break into the nonprofit sector or find a more fulfilling path. Others – such as a 72-year-old member in Grants Pass – do it simply because they want to give back, she said.

Because the VISTA program's main focus is fighting poverty, volunteers serve in the nation's poorest urban or rural areas. Larsen said the UCAN Coalition members are given a living allowance of \$833 per month, health coverage and a relocation allowance of \$550. They're also given an end-of-service stipend for \$1,200 or an education award of \$4,725 that they can put toward student loans or future education costs.

However, the volunteers must find a way to take care of all their expenses, including rent, with the monthly living allowance. They are not allowed to pick up a second job or attend school while serving. Many of the members double up in apartments or live in low-income housing.

"They want the VISTAs to know what it's like living in poverty," Larsen said.

Making a difference

Engeland estimated that he took a 92 percent pay cut since starting work at Alder Creek as the schools coordinator, but because he moved here with his girlfriend, she has helped supplement their income by working in Myrtle Creek.

Other VISTA members, such as 23-year-old Katie Broberg, move alone. Broberg is the UCAN Food Shares resource developer and has been only two months on the job, but already, she's learning how to live with less.

"It's difficult living on the allowance but it has completely opened my eyes to the different choices you have to make and different things you have to sacrifice," Broberg said. "It's something I will carry with me the rest of my life."

In the two months that she's been with VISTA, Broberg has been coordinating food drives and learning the ropes of the Fresh Alliance program – a program that partners food banks with grocery stores to provide produce and meat to the needy. She is hoping to expand the program to more grocery stores across the county.

Over the course of a year at Alder Creek – a nonprofit agency with 78 acres on which youth learn about creating sustainable forest and watersheds – Engeland has developed several projects and after-school programs, one of which is a program for teachers.

Engeland developed a simple curriculum for 4th- through 6th-grade students focusing on watersheds, stream flow and soil. He holds training workshops with teachers to tutor them in the curriculum.

“The Alder Creek teachers program is mine from start to finish. That’s the one I’m most proud of,” Engeland said. “After I’m gone those teachers and that curriculum will still be here and students will still be learning.”

Demand increases

As local organizations began recognizing the benefits of hosting a VISTA member, the demand for volunteers increased. Currently, there are 10 host sites.

Organizations pay \$4,500 to UCAN and UCAN provides a full time VISTA volunteer for one year. This year, The UCAN Coalition received a grant for \$589,412 from the Corporation for National and Community Service to cover the rest of the costs. Any organization wishing to participate must submit an application to UCAN detailing a concept for a project. The project must tie into poverty in some way and have a measurable, self-sustaining outcome. The organization must also be able to provide adequate supervision and support for the VISTA member as well as an assignment description.

Each site can host a VISTA representative for up to three years. It can be the same person or a different person.

Not every VISTA member works out, Larsen said. There is a period of adjustment once they arrive in Southern Oregon.

“Oftentimes, they come from a college town or a city and end up in Riddle or Reedsport or Canyonville and it’s a culture shock,” Larsen said. “It’s difficult for them to adjust to life away from home and from family and then realize they don’t have any money either.”

Once the VISTA members are settled, Larsen said, by and large, it’s a satisfying experience for them.

“People feel good at the end of the year,” she said.

And so do the organizations.

No regrets

Riddle Superintendent Dave Gianotti is Engeland’s supervisor and he is also on the Alder Creek Children’s Forest board of directors. Gianotti said he was never worried about Engeland adjusting to Canyonville.

“The nice thing about Gabe is that he’s not your typical recent college grad,” Gianotti said. “He’s a little older and has some maturity behind him. He spent a lot of time in corporate America, and I think he was looking for a culture shock.”

Gianotti said Engeland has been an incredible resource for Alder Creek.

“Basically, we’re a fledgling organization. We’ve been around for a while, but really haven’t been able to attract enough people to the forest,” Gianotti said.

He said Engeland helped the organization develop infrastructure and helped the board wade through politics and permits to obtain certain facilities so that people can better use the park.

When Engeland’s year is up in April, he’ll attend graduate school. But he and Ostrander have talked about moving back to Myrtle Creek. They’ve relished weekend hikes – something neither of them experienced growing up – and the two can laugh about running out of gas near Tiller Trail Highway because they had no idea so many

miles could pass without a single gas station.

“I’ve actually never doubted my decision,” Engeland said of his choice to sign up to be a VISTA member. “I’ve made a lot of bad decisions in my life and few good ones, and I know how to spot the good ones. I’ve never regretted this decision for a minute.”

- You can reach reporter Cara Pallone at 957-4208 or by e-mail at cpallone@nrtoday.com.

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