



Operation Fresh Start Conservation Graduate Crew participants collect prairie seeds, install plantings, and gain critical experience for careers in conservation.

HARD DAYS, BRIGHT FUTURES

A new program offers a pathway to conservation careers.

BY **KIMBERLY HAZEN** AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY **OPERATION FRESH START**

Participants in Operation Fresh Start's (OFS) new Conservation Graduate Crew program are learning about a new kind of fun, one that takes some time to register.

Caroline Zimmerman, the Conservation Graduate Crew supervisor with OFS, says this surprising variety of fun can be very rewarding. "I call what they learn with me 'type two fun,'" she explains. "You know, it sucks at the moment, but it's super fun to look back on and say that you did that."

Last month, OFS celebrated the launch of the new program, which is designed to provide rigorous on-the-job training in conservation for young adults. Known primarily for its Legacy program giving 16- to 24-year-olds the opportunity to earn a high school diploma and driver's license, OFS is a 50-year-old organization that enables young adults to find pathways to family-sustaining careers.

The Conservation "Grad Crew" program is the only paid, advanced-level opportunity in Dane County for young adults to prepare for a career in natural resource management. It supplements the 10-year-old Construction Graduate Crew program that has successfully placed participants in construction firms across Wisconsin.

For the conservation program, a typical day begins with unloading equipment followed by a site orientation. "We go

through what we're doing and whether there are any hazards at the site," Zimmerman explains, noting that work may include brush cutting, felling trees, prescribed fires, prairie restoration, plantings, and other work. "I'm training people on how to run the equipment and spray herbicides, but I also make sure we get the certification training done."

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— **Caroline Zimmerman**,
Operation Fresh Start.

The OFS program provides the only local opportunity in FEMA safety training, chainsaw training, pesticide applicator 6.0 certification, and wildland fire certification without enrolling in a college program. Workdays are long with interns logging four 10-hour days per week, and the work is hard. "Honestly, I think they enjoy working hard and having a three-day weekend. They think that's a big perk," Zimmerman observes. "I think they know that if they want this to be a career, there's an understanding that this is going to be hard work." It's this rigorous training that makes

the program so valuable for participants, particularly those who wouldn't be able to attain this type of experience anywhere else. The field of conservation can be difficult to enter for those without the time and money to gain experience through volunteering. "Typically, when you want to get into conservation, you're told to volunteer for an organization," says Cory Rich, OFS conservation and construction manager. "So, if you need to support yourself and a family, you're not going to be able to do that, and that's a pretty big barrier."

For members of marginalized communities and people of color, lowering this barrier can mean a pathway to a viable career. According to Rich, partners are excited to team up with OFS because 80% of its participants are people of color and 73% are low-income individuals. "They are well aware that in conservation, everyone looks the same and they want to change that," states Rich.

Thanks to the Legacy program, participants understand the importance of timeliness and enthusiasm for the job. "That's something that we hammer early and often," Rich says. "You have to show up. You must be on time, and when I say 'on time,' I mean five minutes early." The skills participants master in the Legacy program and the experience they gain on the job make them ideal candidates for

employment. "Once we get them exactly where we want them to be, we lose them," Rich says. "They get hired away, which is perfect."

Program partners include Groundswell Conservancy, the UW Arboretum, the Nature Conservancy, the city of Madison, and other organizations. For the city's engineering department, the OFS Conservation Graduate Crew was needed for native and invasive plant identification and hands-on restoration.

Maddie Dumas, the greenway vegetation coordinator for the department, was impressed with the team's work. "We challenged them with some pretty difficult days: planting in a downpour, foliar spraying weeds for entire days at a time, and removing brush on technically challenging sites," Dumas explains. "They rose to the challenge."

While the program is only a few months old, the goal is to provide a six to 12-month experience for participants, although no set length of time is required to be engaged. "It's geared toward getting people ready to make that jump into the profession," Rich says. "For someone highly motivated, they can be knocking out their certifications and make a great impression on a potential employer. Every day is a job interview for them, and the goal is to see them move on." ■