

# Trails

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"This is an amazing team," Geoff Hamilton, the Conservation Corps' manager, said of Moriarty's crew. "They're all younger than I'd normally feel comfortable with but they are awesome. They're very independent and able to solve problems on their own.

"These kids could be doing anything," Hamilton said. "But they chose to serve. And I'd put them right up there with anyone else who serves."

That's no idle compliment. Hamilton was in the Army for 20 years, including a tour in Bosnia and two tours in Iraq.

At the start of the summer, each trail crew received a week of training on how to use the equipment. The crew leaders had an extra week of leadership training. They also learned the intricacies of making stone steps on a trail, and how to make those steps look as natural as possible.

"We need an 8-inch rise for each step," said Moriarty, a Don Bosco graduate who just earned a degree in English from Ursinus College outside Philadelphia, where he played baseball. He plans to go to law school.

"We put crushed rocks under each step so they won't move," Moriarty continued, "and the step has to have contact with the stone base or landing in front of it. And gargoyles are big rocks we put on the sides of the steps that angle in and put pressure on the steps to keep them in place.

"There's no concrete or mortar used," he said. "It's like Roman arches – it's all held together through pressure."

For the past few weeks, Moriarty's crew has been creating a new footprint for part of the Ramapo Reservation's Vista Loop Trail. The old section of the trail is deeply rutted from use. Rocks and tree roots jut out, causing hazards for hikers. The trail has been eroded as well from rainfall runoff.

The new section will run closer to MacMillan Brook and provide a striking view of a waterfall that splashes over a small cliff. The stone steps will help prevent erosion.

"There's science involved, but it's also an art form," Hamilton said.

The biggest challenge, Moriarty said, "is finding the right stones. We use a rotary hammer drill, and we slit rocks by having one person hold a riveting hammer which another person hits with a sledgehammer."

So far no fingers have been accidentally smashed. "There's a lot of trust involved among the team," Moriarty said.

His crew includes Heather Tufano, 22, a Ramsey resident who just graduated from William Paterson University, majored in environmental science and wants to work in wildlife conservation. "I've been coming here to Ramapo Reservation my whole life, and with this summer job I'm doing something beneficial for it," Tufano said.

She had to admit that initially, her



MARKO GEORGIEV/NORTHJERSEY.COM

NY/NJ Trail Conference volunteers work on building new trails at the Ramapo Valley County Reservation.

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#### GEOFF HAMILTON

NEW YORK-NEW JERSEY TRAIL CONFERENCE'S  
CONSERVATION CORPS MANAGER

muscles were sore. "The first week it was pretty rough getting up each morning," she said.

Another member of the crew is Jeremy Johnson, 20, a Seton Hall Prep graduate from Union Township who is majoring in environmental studies at Rowan University.

"I know that I like environmental issues, but I'm not sure what I want to do for a job, so I thought this would be a good intro to the field, and it seemed like a way to have a fun and interesting summer," Johnson said.

"I expected to be making trails, but I didn't understand how much hard work it is and how intricate the stairs are to make," he said.

Oh, and Johnson hates bugs. "I was swarmed by flies the first week – it was horrible," he said.

Ryan Jackson, 22, of Freehold, is the other member of the crew. She just graduated from Drew University, where she played soccer and basketball, majored in anthropology, and minored in environmental science. She'll be attending the University of Wyoming in the fall to earn a master's in geography.

Jackson had helped build trails during spring break in an old mining area of Kentucky. "I've always wanted to be outside and like hiking and hate being inside," she said.

The Ramapo crew is the only one working in New Jersey. The other crews are fixing trails in New York. Two crews are at Bear Mountain State Park, two are in Sterling Forest State Park, one is in the

Breakneck Ridge area of Hudson Highlands State Park Preserve, and one is stationed in the Catskills. Another team identifies and removes invasive plant species along trails.

"I'm impressed by the quality of work they're doing," Hamilton said. "And they do it in the heat, they do it in the rain. They don't stop – and they don't want to."

The Conservation Corps attracts participants from across the country through AmeriCorps. Hamilton said the experience creates bonds among the members of each crew. The teams stay each night at a group camp on Lower Twin Lake in Harriman State Park. When they are all together, you can still figure out which corps members are crewmates by the way they interact, Hamilton said.

The teams are funded with grants from the William Froelich Foundation and the Bergen County Parks Department, along with the Trail Conference's own fundraising efforts.

Those who commit to 450 hours of service earn a living allowance of \$3,500 and an education award of \$1,527. Some people commit to a 900-hour term of service, extending into October, and earn a living allowance of \$7,000 and an education award of \$2,887.

Moriarty said working on trails in Ramapo Reservation for the summer was something he couldn't pass up. "I live down the street – I've come here and explored every inch of this place," he said. "I'll bring friends from out of town and take them up to Hawk Rock for the amazing view."

Now, he'll add another memorable experience in the reservation – building stone steps in the woods. "It's something that's going to last and that I can show my friends and my kids and grandkids," he said. "And it's preserving something I've been close to forever."