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DOG DAYS WITH A PURPOSE

Canine Crew Gains Valuable Experience Training Service Dogs



TAOS (July 25, 2022) – Ten Northern New Mexico young people with disabilities were members of the Rocky Mountain Youth Corps' (RMYC) "Canine Crew" this summer. For six weeks, participants trained service dogs in Taos and worked at Assistance Dogs of the West headquarters in Santa Fe. Among their responsibilities was helping to train and groom the dogs, provide health checks, and monitor dogs' play groups. They also recorded the weights of the more than 20 dogs involved and kept their pens clean.



Emma Perkowska, 18, of Arroyo Seco, NM, trains a yellow lab named Wave.

As these students were part of the New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (NMDVR) Pre-Employment Transition Services and On-the-Job Training program, they also spent time practicing job skills such as punctuality, teamwork, communication, and self-advocacy, while learning more about their options regarding further education and employment. Each participant completed a vocational interest survey, created or updated their resume, and became certified in CPR during the summer.

Six students attend the New Mexico School for the Deaf (NMSD). Four others are from the Taos area.

"This program provides instant motivation and engagement for students and entails so many of the foundational skills needed for successful transitions (to life after school): perseverance, frustration tolerance, problem-solving, splitting large goals into smaller steps, clear communication, patience," says Denise Dumesnil, Canine Leadership Crew, RMYC of New Mexico. "Working with the dogs naturally provides an opportunity to learn and practice these skills, with immediate feedback from the dog—who is nonjudgmental and for many students, easier to connect with than peers."

Dumesnil adds being in the Canine Crew is real-world work, so students had to complete an application and all the necessary paperwork that comes with a job, such as tax forms and direct deposit authorizations. They were paid for their work.

Participants ranged in age from 15 to 28. The 28-year-old, Marco Kiesling of Taos, has been offered to continue in a part-time position with Assistance Dogs of the West. Another has enrolled at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC. The rest are returning to high school this fall.

Dumesnil notes that in addition to conquering their other challenges, the Canine Crew had to overcome the language barrier: those from Taos don't know American Sign Language, and most of the students from NMSD had not previously worked in a hearing-dominant setting. "This was a fantastic crew and I'm so proud of how they connected," she says.

NMDVR contracts with RMYC to provide Pre-Employment Transition Services for students in Northern New Mexico with disabilities. To participate in this or any NMDVR program, New Mexico residents with a disability (of any age) should visit dvr.state.nm.us and make an appointment at one of the agency's [two dozen offices](#).

The New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (NMDVR) helps eligible individuals with documented disabilities find suitable employment. To do so, NMDVR partners with companies and agencies seeking opportunities to enhance and diversify their workforce. Vocational rehabilitation is a voluntary program supporting people who want to work. With a long history of success and proven methodology for making the best fits, NMDVR is committed to helping participants thrive in their communities.



Marco Kiesling of Taos, with Carmel.

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