Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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Thousands of American Indian high school boys and girls will keep the jobs they had this summer. But they won't be drop-outs. They will be “step-ups” into a special program combining work opportunities with part-time schooling leading to high school diplomas.

They are part of the Neighborhood Youth Corps--students who, were it not for the employment they are provided under the Economic Opportunity Act, may have joined the ranks of early school quitters because of the financial needs of their families. About 22,000 Indian youngsters were enrolled this past summer.

An experiment in helping teen-agers to help themselves, the NYC has been hailed by school teachers and administrators as the long-sought “holding power” that too many high school programs lack. For the student who sees a diploma slipping from his grasp because he literally cannot afford to continue in school-- and also for the student whose school problems center upon his failure to see the relationship between classroom and the world of work--NYC offers an opportunity to earn while continuing to learn.

Indian youth, living in Indian communities from the Great Smokies in North Carolina to the Alaska panhandle, have spent what an official in the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs terms a "summer of self-discovery.”

Employed at the established minimum of $1.25 per hour, they have gone to work on jobs that needed doing but went undone for want of help--as hospital aides, library assistants, school and hospital maintenance and repair helpers, assistants in the record-keeping offices of various public agencies, workers on conservation and land reclamation projects, and helpers in public day-care centers for children of working mothers.

High on the Arizona plateaus that mark Hopi land, the NYC program enrolled '83 boys and girls of high school age in work projects to improve their land and villages. It put more cash into the pockets of Hopi families than many customarily see in a year, as the Hopi economy still is geared to livestock and crop farming, and some crafts production. Despite their remoteness and traditional reserve, the Hopi Indians place tremendous value upon education and are ardent supporters of programs that open up new educational opportunities for their young people.

At Taos, New Mexico, 85 young people spent two summer months repairing adobe buildings, fencing ranges, or serving as guides for the thousands of tourists who visit the remote but famed Taos Indian Pueblo in the New Mexico mountains. Added to their 30 hours per week of work were ten hours of classroom instruction for those who needed remedial programs to enable them to keep pace with their high school classes. The ten hours of weekly study were not reimbursed, but neither were they begrudged by the student workers. Much of the credit for the program's success is attributable to the Taos tribal leaders, whose wholehearted support set the tone for the student participants, BIA officials said.

Indian leadership almost everywhere has given support--and, thereby, prestige--to the Neighborhood

Youth Corps for teen-agers, as well as to the companion "Operation Head Start" for pre-schoolers.

Insofar as possible, Indian adults were selected to work with the summertime Neighborhood Youth Corps. College students also formed a part of the leadership teams. On the Cherokee Reservation in North Carolina, it was soon discovered that Cherokee youngsters were particularly receptive to the example set by the college youth, who stressed such factors as attentiveness, good grooming, promptness, responsibility, and initiative on the job. This was also true elsewhere.

"I'm old enough to quit high school," one somber-eyed Cherokee boy said. "I could get a job in one of the plants around here, and make some money. But I'm going to stay in school and get my diploma, because I'll still be able to earn some money and buy some of the things I want if I work with NYC while I'm in school. They keep telling us that a school dropout never gets beyond an unskilled job. Well, to tell the truth, I don't care about that so much. But I do care about the layoff time, when there's no money coming in. With a better education, there are more chances of good work and good-paying work. That's why I'm going to finish school this year under the NYC."

An Oklahoma girl reported on her experience on the student work program: "I always thought I'd like to be a teacher but I knew I couldn't afford to go to college, so I didn't see much point in finishing high school. But if I can work part-time, all the way through, and then get a scholarship from the Bureau or some Federal loan, then there's a real chance. One of the college student leaders on our NYC project is going to be a teacher. She has a loan and a scholarship and I admire her very much."

In the remote Indian community of Poplar, Montana, 33 Sioux boys and girls of the Fort Peck Reservation were also enrolled in NYC during the past summer. Among them were five who had graduated from high school and were planning to go on to further schooling in the fall. These five, and three college students, were among the leadership group in a promotional "Youth Opportunity Campaign," augmenting the Neighborhood Youth Corps and the Indian Bureau's own summer youth training program.

Sioux Indian areas in the Dakotas, and the remote Turtle Mountain Chippewa Reservation on the Canadian border, were also locales of Neighborhood Youth Corps activity during July and August, expected to continue through the present school year and will be extended into numerous additional Indian communities.

To participate in NYC, the local community must take the initiative by outlining a useful work program for student trainees and submitting the proposal to the Department of Labor, which operates the program for the office of Economic Opportunity in Washington, D. C. The Bureau of Indian Affairs, with a three-man staff of Economic Opportunity liaison officers, has served as the information agency to Indian communities, and has provided technical aid in developing not only NYC but other federally funded youth aid programs under the anti-poverty agency. Paralleling efforts in NYC have been the widespread "Head Start" projects for pre-schoolers, which enrolled nearly 10,000 during the past summer.

The Bureau staff in Washington anticipates that enrollments in the Neighborhood Youth Corps will increase now that school has begun.