

February beneficiary

Your Mountain Connection donates \$250 every month to a local nonprofit featured on this page through the Mountain Connection Beneficiary Program. To date, Your Mountain Connection has donated more than \$111,000. Evergreen resident Margo Hamilton is the volunteer beneficiary coordinator for the Mountain Connection. She has an extensive background working with nonprofits and writes to help people better understand each other.



BY MARGO HAMILTON

VOLUNTEERS FOR OUTDOOR COLORADO

Who's not complaining about an increase in traffic, population, and building within our mountain communities? It's taking a toll on longtime residents who remember hiking, biking, and horseback riding on expansive trails and land that was void of a steady stream of people and fence lines. Still the masses are moving into our mountain communities for the exact same reason that draws everyone; we love the quality lifestyle our mountain communities offer. But there's something each one of us have to ponder, what am I giving back to help preserve the land, trails, and open spaces we dearly love?

Volunteers for Outdoor Colorado (VOC) has the answer: donate your time to volunteer! VOC's youngest volunteer is six years old and the eldest is 93 and both can be found volunteering on projects that accommodate their ages and interests just like everyone else! From planting vegetable gardens or weeding community gardens to taking care of the fragile eco and trails systems that scale 14,000ft, you can find your niche to help care, protect and serve our trails, open spaces, and parks within your neighboring community or throughout this gorgeous state!

VOC's Director of Community Relations and Strategic Partnerships, Anna Zawitsza, adds, "Due to many budget cuts within land management agencies, we are more dependent on our volunteers than ever before. Due to the increased

population moving into Colorado who love the outdoor recreation our state offers, very few think about what it takes to maintain trails, waterways, 14,000ft parks, and open spaces. Those bikers who ride off the trails with their bikes to allow hikers and horseback riders to pass don't realize the damage that occurs with the massive number of bicyclists who are now on our trails. To one and all using the trails, if you scamper off an established trail to establish what we refer to as "social trails," meaning enough people who step off a chartered trail and time again create a trail that won't drain water appropriately and this causes erosion over time."



Who hasn't seen graffiti bombard buildings, walls, and fences in densely populated communities? Well believe it or not, those with a penchant to harm and destroy public property are doing the same to Mother Nature, which Anna reveals is happening in open space and parks throughout Bailey, Conifer, Evergreen, and Morrison. "While still rare, you would be surprised at the graffiti on boulders, trees, and signs at well loved places." The benefit in volunteering with VOC is not what you can do for outdoor spaces we so dearly love, it's what you can learn as an individual, or working with groups that would include

your family, civic groups, churches, mosques, temples, and fellow employees, Anna claims, "VOC awaits the opportunity to learn about our fragile ecosystems and both the positive and negative factors our natural resources such as trails and open spaces face. It takes all of us to unite to make these precious resources useable and sustainable. And, Your Mountain Connection readers, you live in the very heart of an easily-accessible recreational area for you and our metro population."

In addition to bonding with people that love our trails and open spaces, at the end of a project, you are treated to a hearty and delicious meal. If you go on a weekend adventure and volunteer over several days, you are treated to not only amazing meals and camping accommodations, you will also gather around the campfire for s'mores, beer and the quintessential outdoor experiences that create happy and enduring memories for all involved.

VOC's project season is from April through October, and they are heavily scheduled with projects from June through September. No matter your strength, endurance, or knowledge of the great outdoors, you are desperately needed. And if you have experience, or the desire to become a

more experienced outdoors-person, VOC needs you to become longterm volunteers to teach others the proper way to construct trails, work on bridges, and create switchbacks to put an end to the social trails that are destroying the land we love.

Crew chefs are also needed to create those hearty meals everyone needs after a day of service or weekend of service.

I can't think of anyone whose heart won't be touched by VOC's call to action to become a volunteer. If you're single, this is a great opportunity to meet people. If you have a family, what better way to spend valuable time doing a lasting service you will obviously see time and time again when you hike, bike or get your horses out on our amazing trails. And for groups of people, create a tighter bond by uniting in service outside the walls or your organization.

For more information, visit VOC's website at voc.org, or give them a call at 303-715-1010 and their administrative assistant will route you to the staff member that can personally respond to your questions. You won't have to remind yourself of the need via a sticky note or calendar reminder on your smartphone. Every time you drive past your favorite Jefferson County, Park County or Clear Creek County Park, open space or trail system, nature will be calling out to you! Let's unite to answer that call!