

## Teen Summer Camp brings community during COVID-19

By Caramie Petrowsky –

For Sandra Vazquez, 15, the new Teen Summer Camp at The Salvation Army El Paso County (Colorado) has been a “really fun” opportunity that’s pulled her away from her desk, where she likes to draw by herself, and out into the community to learn and help others.

“It’s been so great—especially in this time when there’s nothing to do; so many places are closed,” said Vazquez, who moved to Colorado Springs, Colorado, at age 12 from her native Puerto Rico. She credits The Salvation Army with helping her adjust and make friends—all while strengthening her relationship with God.

“You can draw a bunch of characters but that doesn’t mean they’re friends with you,” she said.

Colorado Springs Corps Assistant and Young People’s Sergeant Major (YPSM) La Shan Harrison and his wife, Brett Marie Harrison, Corps Public Relations and Special Events Director and Assistant YPSM, decided to start the camp after seeing how the quarantine had affected the corps’ teenagers. While they were grateful to be able to open the summer day camp for younger kids, ages 5 to 12, they worried about the older kids.

“We felt terrible for our teen demographic who have been stuck at home, with little to no interaction since March,” Brett Harrison said.

Thus Teen Summer Camp was born. The seven-week long camp costs just \$10 per week for each teen, enough to cover basic overhead costs, such as food.

“We are taking them to do challenging, yet incredibly rewarding things to hopefully grow their relationship with not only The Salvation Army, but with God,” Brett Harrison said. “Along with many long hikes, every Wednesday the teens visit another ministry here in our community. We want them to experience how great it feels to be the hands and feet of Jesus, and to learn a little bit about how wonderfully giving Colorado Springs is.”

The Harrisons have instituted plenty of safety measures, including wearing face masks while inside and around others; sanitizing hands and surfaces regularly; transporting the teens in bigger vehicles to allow them to spread out; and social distancing on the trails as well as reminding them to watch



their feet and always use the buddy system.

“They are incredible kids and have been very safe and aware of their surroundings,” Brett Harrison said.



As part of the camp over the last few weeks, Vazquez has made new friends, explored the nearby mountains and volunteered at other nearby ministries. During the camp’s first three weeks, the eight attendees have worked in the food pantry at Crossfire Ministries organizing and stocking perishables and filling hygiene bags; picked up trash and fed animals at farm animal rescue Ginger Snap Ranch; and harvested lettuce and cared for the aquaponics garden at Mountain Springs Church.

The volunteer work has been particularly rewarding for Vazquez.

“Those are my favorite days,” she said. “I like the fact that what I’m doing helps other people. It’s little things I can do that help the community. I feel like what I’m doing does matter; it does make a change and have an effect. I like that. And I like that I get to learn a lot about how things work.”

After only three weeks, the campers had already hiked more than a dozen miles, learning about nature and “being at peace in God’s creation,” Brett Harrison said. Many of the teens come from low-income families, and have never volunteered, or seen the nearby mountains up close.

“To watch them light up and realize that they are helping not only themselves, but others, is absolutely incredible,” Harrison said. “We have seen these teens in just a short two weeks, open up to each other, and are beginning to find themselves.”

On one of the recent hikes near Helen Hunt falls, the Harrisons challenged the campers to navigate some more difficult terrain over trees, through a creek and over other rough ground. Vazquez pushed herself to complete the hike, even though it was difficult.

“She hung in there and was a champ,” Harrison said. “We got to our resting point and she said...‘that is the most incredible thing I have ever done in my life.’ We just smiled. We knew that she had just accomplished something she has never done, and accomplished something she didn’t think she could do.”

So far, the Teen Summer Camp has been a win-win for everyone involved.

“The most boring time of year for teens is the summertime and this year summer break started much earlier,” Colorado Springs Corps Officer Captain Doug Hanson said. “Our teens now have something fun to do while building a stronger relationship with each other, our youth workers and with God. We are so grateful to be able to continue our summer day camp and start up this new teen program even during this pandemic.”

The Corps’ teens are on a roll. Harrison said that recently they planned and executed a car wash, raising \$256 for The Salvation Army World Services.