

Career Academy students have a day in the park

Staff from the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District (HSWCD) hosted a very special field trip for the Career Academy students on January 6th. Complete with nature walks, special tram rides, a tour of the Civilian Conservation Corps Museum, a scavenger hunt and a delicious lunch, the sixty-five students seemed to have a great time.

One of the main goals of the HSWCD is education. The Career Academy program, specifically the Environmental Science classes, give HSWCD staff the opportunity to teach students the importance of the environment and give them hands-on training in the real world.

Career Academy is a program involving high school students in 10th, 11th and 12th grades. While training for a technical career these students are able to complete their required high school courses in one location, which is the South Florida Community College campus. This new venture of the Highlands County School Board and the college's Division of Applied Sciences and Technologies, allows students to spend half a day in standard academic classes and the other half in college-level technical courses.

The benefits of this program are many; the student only has to travel to one location, which eliminates travel time, allowing them to spend more time in classes. Costs for tuition and books are deferred and by obtaining technical training while in high school, students can earn a diploma while completing the requirements for a certificate or associate's degree in applied sciences. The goal is that upon graduation, they will be qualified to hold a well-paying job in the technical field of their choice.

For the past 4 months, Erin McCarta, Assistant Lakes Manager, and Corine Burgess, Natural Resources Specialist with the HSWCD, have been working with the Environmental Science students and teaching them about the environment.

The subjects staff has covered with the youths thus far include littoral zones, composting, invasive exotic plants and animals, water quality and career opportunities in the environmental field. Each subject was taught in the classroom first and followed up by an outdoor day with hands-on training. So far the students have explored, first hand, what lives in the littoral zone, obtained a home composter, removed over 200 exotic plants from the college campus and learned quite a bit about their surrounding environment.

The next session with the students will be a water quality lab where they will take actual samples of the water in Lake Glenada and staff from HSWCD will have those samples analyzed. This process will teach the youths not only the proper way to take a sample, but what all the data that comes back from the lab actually means regarding water quality.

Scientific method will be the final subject in this year long study course. Staff from HSWCD has plans to get the students involved in a project using the scientific method and possibly have a contest and give out awards to students that have applied all that they have learned.

The field trip to Highlands Hammock State Park on January 6th was an opportunity for the students to get out in the “real world” and apply some of what they have learned through an educational, yet fun, expedition. Some of the activities that the youths participated while in the woods included an informative tram ride where they had an opportunity to learn about the plants and animals in the park, see some of the local wildlife and fresh panther tracks, and enjoy the beauty of nature. In addition, they were able to tour the Civilian Conservation Corp Museum and learn about the history of the park and how our country has been through hard times before. A scavenger hunt was the final activity before the picnic lunch and the students were instructed to find different items including some of the exotic plants that they have learned about.

The trip was a total success; the students had a great time, HSWCD staff was inspired to continue with these types of programs and Board Supervisors, who grilled burgers and hot dogs for the students, had an opportunity to see their staff in action as well as interact with the students.

These young adults are the future and it is important that they understand their environment, are good stewards of the land and that they teach others to take care of our precious resources.