

Volunteering helps grad overcome fear of the g-word

I was terrified of becoming a grown-up.

by Amy Vaerewyck

It's that simple ... well, almost that simple. I was also anxious to give something back to my country, meet other liberal-minded people, and expand my horizons beyond the Midwest.

But, if I'm honest with myself, I'll admit that the primary reason I applied for AmeriCorps after college graduation was to postpone, if only for a year, the malevolent process of growing up.

At the time, I thought being grown up meant a life sentence of serious (i.e. boring) jobs and 40-hour workweeks, with vacations few and far between. Enter visions of the cubicle-confined guy in the movie "Office Space" whose boring job drives him to physically assault the office fax machine.

So, I applied to and was accepted by the Larimer County Youth

Conservation Corps, where the work is anything but boring.

With LCYCC, a Fort Collins, Colo.-based AmeriCorps program, I've worked at a different site on a different project almost every week. I've built culverts, cut trail, cleaned fish pools, hung drywall, built fences, and spread mulch—and that's not even the half of it.

No stale routine, no confining cubicle,

no lifelong commitment. For a while, I thought I had effectively avoided growing up. Now, I know I was wrong.

For one, I am working 40-hour weeks (even more when you add the 80 hours of

mandatory outside service required of corps members). With 1,700 hours of service to complete in 11 months, phrases like "summer vacation" and "spring break" are no longer in my vocabulary.

For another, I'm now financially independent, earning a monthly stipend of less than \$700 and facing student loans exceeding \$15,000.

But time and money shortages aside, I've grown up in some more meaningful ways. I've learned, more deeply than I thought possible, the enormous importance and potential impact of volunteer service. In college, I did regular volunteer work and thought everyone should. But now, I almost can't

imagine what reason anyone could find to not volunteer. Not only does volunteer work "get things done" (the AmeriCorps motto), but it helps others,



Shoveling and spreading mulch at a children's garden.

builds friendships, and fosters an environment of love, compassion and respect in our communities.

I've met an amazing group of other young people who share my love of the outdoors and who value volunteerism

just as much as I do. Whether we remain close or part ways, I know I'll never forget the powerful bonds we formed while working together for the greater good.

And yet, as sacred to me as these new friendships are, I've realized the importance of my relationships back home in Indiana—both familial and non-familial—and how essential it is to my well-being to maintain these relationships.

So, it turns out, being a grown-up doesn't mean being serious all the time. It doesn't mean wearing business suits, starting a 401K, or trading in excitement and variety for a 9x5 cubicle.

All it really means is exactly what it says: to grow. And that's something every one of us can handle.

Amy Vaerewyck, originally from LaPorte, is an AmeriCorps member with the Larimer County Youth Conservation Corps in Fort Collins, Co. She is a 2002 graduate of Butler University, where she majored in journalism and German.



Sawing and removing tree limbs from city streets following a big snow storm.