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ON THE RIVER

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11–14 minutes

First in a series of four articles

On the bank of the muddy Anacostia, the young conservationists stab the earth. The cool, brown soil is hard, dry, almost like brick. But the shovels are unrelenting.

Gradually, the hole widens and deepens.

It is a peculiar scene: life-hardened city youths, toting picks and shovels, pushing wheelbarrows, planting flowers, nursing nature. The work is dirty. Roshawn, Ronnie and their co-workers in the Earth Conservation Corps are sowing seeds they hope will nourish the riverside and themselves.

For seven years, this private, nonprofit organization has offered inner-city youths an exchange: If the young people help to restore the ailing Anacostia River and its wildlife, the corps will supply them with training, a college scholarship and a stipend. Along the way, the bald eagle might be saved. So might a few troubled young people.

But first there will be much mud, much sweat, some tears

and sometimes a slip into the river. And even now, seven years in, the survival of both endangered species is still in question.

Roshawn Thompson, 22, a young woman with black satin braids, thick eyebrows and coffee-brown skin, lifts the tree they are planting this sun-drenched afternoon and sets it down into the cavity, but it doesn't fit. When Roshawn lifts it out again, 18-year-old co-worker Ronnie Rice lays a shovel blade atop an extra long root and mashes down hard.

"Don't hurt the tree," Roshawn pleads.

"The tree ain't hurt," Ronnie fires back.

"The tree got feelings," Roshawn insists.

"Grow tree, grow," Ronnie shouts. He spreads his fingers wide and points at the roots as if he is working voodoo, laughing all the while. "You gotta talk to the tree. Grooow tree!"

In Southeast Washington, amid wailing sirens and the sour waff of a nearby waste treatment plant, at the edge of the corps members' neighborhoods, the river offers refuge.

Roshawn, Ronnie and about three dozen 18-to-25-year-olds and their leader, Rodney Stotts, know the stakes. Some make it out of this place alive, some don't. And some survive in a way they can't rightly call dead or alive.

Donnell Whiteside is 23, 6 foot 3 and 256 pounds--a big guy who sometimes looks like a softie and sometimes like a

thug. He is reserved, soft-spoken, until he recites one of his lyrical messages of urban struggle. He raps first-person--an admitted ex-drug dealer in another life not long passed.

Three weeks into the program, Donnell is still on probation in the corps. But he thinks maybe there is something better for him in this life, especially since that night nearly two years ago when God, or at least the woman who found him lying on a sidewalk, didn't let him bleed to death. A crack-head had stabbed Donnell in the jugular. Now, he's finally starting to feel like he "can breathe."

The air is invigorating here on the leafy western bank of the Anacostia--fresher, freer. Even to Roshawn, a single mother, who is pinning everything on getting the scholarship that she'll earn if she completes the 11-month corps program. She wants to get her general equivalency diploma, enter a computer training program and eventually lift herself and her 16-month-old son, DeQuan, from welfare. But the pressures of work, single motherhood and poverty give little ground.

The dreams of this most recent crop of corps members are not so different from those who have found their way to the Earth Conservation Corps (ECC) in the past. Neither are their circumstances: gangs, drugs, desperation, a shortage of hope. Supervisor Rodney Stotts--himself an ECC graduate--and other corps leaders don't pretend to be dream-makers, just salespeople for new realities.

Reality in the corps is that success will not come easily. The

names of at least five bald eagles, nursed and then released by corps members in an experiment to bring the national symbol back to the nation's capital, are proof of that. Those eagles' names--L.B., Bennie, Darrell, Tink and Monique--each honor a corps member murdered since 1992.

But with every new year comes a new season for planting.

It was a few hours before sunrise on that warm September morning two years ago, almost quitting time, when the crack-head approached Donnell in the dark on a street corner near Ainger Place SE.

Donnell was dressed in gray sweat pants, a plain white T-shirt and his size 13 white-on-white Air Jordans. The addict asked for a 20-bag, but was short a couple of dollars.

Donnell could tell the man was fiending. He had hungry, bloodshot eyes and only \$18. But Donnell let him have it: two rocks for all he had.

A few minutes later, the crack-head showed up again.

Donnell figured something was up. Why would the guy come back for another buy if he barely had enough cash the first time? The man was finishing off a bottle of vodka as he walked straight toward Donnell, close enough to touch. Let me have another rock, the man asked.

"I ain't got no more," Donnell answered, reaching nervously into his pocket and turning to walk away. In a split second, he felt what seemed like a baseball bat crash against his

skull. There was breaking glass, a pain that made his knees weak. He barely had enough strength to grab his attacker. But Donnell couldn't stop the man from thrusting the broken bottle into his neck. Donnell crumpled to the ground, blood gushing like a broken water main. He was not entirely resolved to dying, even though he had always figured that with his drug dealing, he might eventually end up on a slab in the city morgue.

He was 16 when a friend fronted him some cocaine to start up his own franchise. With the dividends, he could buy hip clothes and \$100 sneakers and still have a knot of cash in his pocket, some measure of respect in his world, even if it did leave him feeling hollow and still watching his back. That's the trade-off.

Now, Donnell lay sprawled on the sidewalk, shadows filling his sight, then his head. He eventually woke up in D.C. General Hospital, where he spent the next three weeks. Today, he still bears the scar, an indentation in the right side of his throat that runs almost to his jawbone, a reminder of the 41 stitches--14 on the inside, 27 on the outside--it took to close his wound.

On the serene banks of the Anacostia this sunny afternoon, Donnell totes a bag of mulch like a sack of potatoes. He isn't exactly sure what he wants to be but knows it isn't a drug dealer. At least that's what he says, or at least what a part of him believes, or wants to believe, because to want to be a

drug dealer is to accept the almost certain consequence: death.

"I knew it was time for a change," Donnell says. "The program just came along, and it was ideal. It's what I was looking for, go back to school, finish something . . . be a part of something that's greater than myself."

He has stubble for hair and a five o'clock shadow. His words are deliberate and silky, like a seasoned hustler, but occasionally accompanied by a bashful smile that makes him seem more like a little boy than a big man. His friends in the corps affectionately call him "Big Boy" or "Me-Mo," his nickname. It was a friend who turned Donnell on to ECC a few weeks ago, which happened to be just the right time. Donnell's grandmother, who raised him until he was about 13, taught him well. But even after his brush with death, Donnell couldn't resist the temptation--he was dealing again. The rap beat is medium-fast, a young man patting his chest under a bright sun.

The corps members stand in a circle on a grassy knoll that backs to the river. Donnell prepares to flow. It's Earth Day, and already Donnell and other corps members have dug more holes than they can count. They're on lunch break and have a few minutes to kill before they go back to work.

"Thinking of a master plan," Donnell raps, swaying coolly, the corps members glued to his spit-fire recitation.

All I need is a partner and 500 grams

So I dip into my pocket, and all my money's spent.

It came a time so I gotta grab my Tec-9 and clips.

But now I don't have to dream about getting paid.

So I pray that God forgive me for the heads that I laid. . . ."

Everyone oohs and ahhs, slaps fives. Donnell smiles, relishing the moment.

Donnell wishes his late grandmother could be here. He never knew his father, and he and his mother, who lives in Maryland, never knew his father, and he and his mother, who lives in Maryland, have lived apart for years, separated by past hurts, heartaches, real or imagined. She says Donnell has been in programs like this before--the Job Corps, night school. Each time, his enthusiasm fizzled.

"That's the whole thing, completing them," says his mother, her voice mixed with anxiety and sadness. She asked that her name not be used. "I hope that he does well in the program. I hope that he succeeds."

Donnell, who lives with a cousin, presses on. "I guess in the end, being right is gonna win," he says.

Moments later, he doesn't sound so sure. "Uhhhh, I'm not convinced. I've only been here three weeks. I haven't missed any days. I wasn't late. I'm seriously going to give it a shot."

The next day Donnell doesn't show up for work. But he does

telephone his supervisors to tell them the reason he can't come: His grandmother died.

His supervisors aren't aware that his grandmother died in January--10 years ago.

Corps Has Dual Mission

Founded in 1992, the Earth Conservation Corps is a private, nonprofit organization whose \$450,000 annual budget is dedicated to the dual mission of saving the environment and poor, inner-city youths.

Its founder and executive director, Robert H. Nixon, 44, is a former filmmaker who co-produced "Gorillas in the Mist" and who started the corps because of the "disconnection" between the poor and the rest of American society and because "a big part of our nation's capital was a dump site."

Members receive a \$397 biweekly stipend while in the corps. If they complete 11 months of service, they are awarded a \$4,700 scholarship. Corps members also attend General Equivalency Diploma classes and receive computer and job training.

Since 1992, the corps has removed thousands of tires and tons of debris from the Anacostia River and its tributaries. Corps sponsors include AmeriCorps, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Arboretum, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Summit Foundation of

Washington, U.S. Department of Energy and the office of the mayor.

To contact ECC, call 202-554-1960 or visit www.earthconcorps.org.

CAPTION: At top, from left, Claude Craig, Shawn King and Christopher Williams haul twisted sheet metal from the Anacostia River. Above, from left, Derrick Joe, Ronnie Rice and Lawrency Boone work on setting trees into the hard earth while Aisha Renee Staton, rear, carries water to nourish the new plantings.

CAPTION: Christopher Williams, hauling metal from the Anacostia River, worked with a shovel for more than three hours to dig the metal out from four feet of water, where it was lodged.

CAPTION: Donnell Whiteside takes part in a sensitivity training exercise at a Mother's Day celebration sponsored by the men of the Earth Conservation Corps.

CAPTION: Working for the Future: From left, Donnell Whiteside, Marc Greene and Lawrency Boone participate in the Earth Conservation Corps, a private, nonprofit group that offers training, a college scholarship and a stipend to at-risk youths in exchange for environmental work. These members have been working near the Anacostia riverside in Southeast Washington. (Photo ran on page A01)

