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The Passion of the Young

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Students listen to presentation.

Environmental groups connect with student volunteers in Atlanta

If ever you need an injection of optimism about the future of the environmental movement, a day spent with the young volunteers of Community Collaborations International would be the perfect elixir.

The passion and commitment of this next generation of environmental leaders was on full display in Atlanta recently when the Greening Youth Foundation brought together a line-up of local environmental groups to make a presentation to Community Collaborations International (CCI) college students working in Atlanta during their Christmas break to assist flood victims. On a frigid, snowy afternoon in the basement of an Atlanta church, the environmental groups told the young volunteers about the many environmental challenges facing Atlanta in coming years and encouraged them to channel their dedication and zeal to make a difference.

“Our whole mission is connecting young folks and students to the environment,” Angelou Ezeilo, Greening Youth Foundation Executive Director, said to the CCI group as she introduced presenters from the Atlanta Beltline, the Greening Youth

Foundation, Sustainable Atlanta and S.E.e.E.D. (Students Endeavoring For Enlightened Environmental Decisions).



GYF Education Director Ruth Kitchen (in orange sweater) gets the students warmed up.

Community Collaborations International offers volunteers the opportunity to work on vital community service projects in the United States and abroad for short, concentrated time periods. The group’s motto is “placing volunteers where they are needed most.” CCI projects include hurricane relief in Texas, flood relief in Georgia, sea turtle rescue in Costa Rica, building sustainable, eco-friendly facilities in Panama, and helping villagers develop a sustainable economic base in Costa Rica by building micro-enterprise tourism businesses. The students pay hundreds of dollars to be part of the volunteer groups. The volunteers that listened to the Atlanta presentation were from George Washington University in Washington, D.C., and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. While they are volunteering in Atlanta, the students are bunking together—several hundred at a time—in a converted church off Highland Avenue in the Old Fourth Ward.

Laura Cordero of the Atlanta Beltline told the students the history of the ambitious Beltline project, which was actually conceived by a student at Georgia Tech. In light of the recent *Forbes* magazine report ranking Atlanta as the most “toxic” city in the country and the fact that Atlanta has the lowest percentage of park space among the nation’s 25 biggest cities, Cordero stressed the importance of the Beltline, which is combining greenspace, trails, transit and new development along 22 miles of historic rail lines that encircle the city of Atlanta. Cordero told the young people that the 20-year Beltline project, which started five years ago, will improve the city’s health and its quality of life. The students were

intrigued by the possibilities of the Beltline and asked Cordero about the many challenges the project still faces.



Laura Cordero provides details on the Atlanta Beltline.

James Ezeilo, Operations Director for Greening Youth Foundation, told the audience about the rare opportunity that GYF has created to offer college students paid internships at National Park Service sites. He gave details about a GYF internship project that's about to start at three NPS sites in Colorado, using homeless teenagers from the Denver area. Several of the CCI volunteers said they have already done NPS internships. Ade Oguntoye, GYF's Director of Strategic Partnerships and Community Outreach, provided the students with details of the intern selection process.

James King of S.E.e.E.D. , which was started by students at Morehouse College, talked about the group's efforts to start an organization while on campus to switch the incandescent lightbulbs in poor neighborhoods. S.E.e.E.D. was formed to bring awareness to environmental justice and energy/water conservation issues. Imran Battla, a Program Associate for Sustainable Atlanta, an environmental consulting group, gave a brief history of Atlanta's water crisis and talked about his organization's efforts to lead Atlanta to a sensible solution to its water shortage.

"We wanted to leave you with the idea of self-entrepreneurship," Battla said to the students. "We have the power in our own hands."

Ezeilo said she will be organizing another environmental presentation to a new group of CCI student volunteers sometime in the early spring.