

### **Environmental Education Internship with the Brooklyn Bridge Park Conservancy**

The Brooklyn Bridge Park Conservancy is an independent citizens' organization that works to provide funding, maintenance, public support, employment, and free programming in the Brooklyn Bridge Park. The park, upon completion, will occupy 85 acres of post-industrial Brooklyn waterfront on the East River, and will stretch 1.3 miles from the Manhattan Bridge through the Brooklyn Bridge and down to Atlantic Avenue. The park has six piers and other post-industrial waterfront property that has been converted to parkland. Currently, only Piers 1 and 6 are open, the others will be added as funding becomes available. This summer, the area between the Brooklyn and Manhattan bridges, known as Empire-Fulton Ferry State Park and the Brooklyn Bridge Plaza, was under construction and should open this fall. It was exciting being in a dynamic atmosphere where I could see visible changes and improvements in the park happening every day.

The Conservancy has been working for over 25 years to ensure that the Brooklyn Bridge Park will be a world-class park available to all New Yorkers and other visitors. The conservancy is run by a small office of six staff members that are in charge of everything from fund raising, to publications, to programming. I mostly worked with the Directors of Education and Stewardship and the Director of Public Programming. I worked in the park everyday and spent very little time in the office, but I never felt uncomfortable in the office because the staff was very welcoming. I worked with the educational programming in the mornings three days a week, and staffed the free programming events three to four days a week. Most of the free programming events took place in the evenings, but I did work all day on Saturdays.

The Director of Education and Stewardship, Kara Gilmour, was my internship coordinator, and a lot of my work involved helping out with the education classes the park offers to summer camps and schools. I assisted teachers in the park on a daily basis. Private and public summer camps would come to the park for the morning and I would teach them about the unique estuary ecosystem of the East River, the types of native trees in the park, the

sustainable nature of the park, and the history of the Brooklyn Bridge. Since I was not in charge of teaching the class I spent more time with the campers individually, and it was incredible to see how excited they were about what they were learning and how much they wanted to show off what they already knew.

Most of the campers were inner-city children who live near the park but had never actually been down to the East River or seen the wildlife I found commonplace in the park. One group of children was so astonished by the number of bumblebees that they were transfixed, and watched the bees move through the flowerbeds instead of paying attention to the class. It was trying to deal with the campers at times, they could be very disrespectful and inattentive, but once I reminded myself that I knew little to nothing about where they came from it was easier to accept their behavior and make sure that they had the best experience possible. It was extremely hot in the park during the day and as a new park, the trees have not grown large enough to provide shade so it was always hard to stay energized and keep the campers interested in the classes when they were just as hot.

My favorite class to assist was called Seining the River Wild. For this class, the campers got to see the variety of sea creatures living in the unique ecosystem of the East River. Most people think that the waters around Manhattan are incredibly dirty and that nothing can live in them, I even had my doubts before this summer, but we pulled out a number of sea creatures each day we did a seining. During each class I would put on waders and take a seining net out into the river with another intern and drag the net to shore and show the kids what we found. We found everything from Comb Jellies, to Blue Shell Crabs, to Atlantic Silverside fish. They usually find other saltwater creatures like puffer fish and sea horses, but this summer was an off summer so we did not find any of those creatures. The most incredible creature I found was a Decorator Crab living in the bottom of a large metal trashcan I dragged water. I won't ever forget the look of excitement on each camper's face every time we brought the seining net out of the

water; no matter what we found, nor how mundane it seemed to us after doing the class so many times, they were always shocked and awed by the creatures we caught.

I also worked with the Director of Public Programming, Alison Hughes. I helped set-up, run, and break down several of the free program's the conservancy hosts in the park throughout the summer. I helped with the Pilates class, the chess program, the kayaking program, the Syfy Movies with a View summer series, and the Playground Associates. This work involved manual labor but it paid off to see the variety of people that came to the programs and to enjoy the park.

The Syfy movie series was one of my favorite programs in the park. Once a week the Conservancy, sponsored by Syfy, projected movies onto a large screen with the Lower Manhattan skyline as the backdrop. This could be the most trying day of the week and the most rewarding. Sometimes members of the audience were not pleasant, but the general excitement and anticipation of the films was intoxicating. People would wait in the park all afternoon for the lawn to open so they could pick the perfect square of grass for their picnic and movie viewing. Watching the sun set behind the Manhattan skyline was not a bad perk either, and a view I will never tire of witnessing.

I worked with the Playground Associates once a weekend doing arts and crafts with children that were on the playgrounds in the park. The Playground Associates set up educational-based activities for the children to do. On the weekend the activities had nature themes so I worked with one of the Associates every Saturday. Some of the kids were from the neighborhoods around the park and were in the park every weekend, while others were only visiting the area for a weekend outing. It was really fun to be able to use my knowledge of trees and rocks that I learned from my forestry and geology classes at Sewanee to teach the kids about the things they could find in the park. The kids were always very excited to learn new things and would continually come up to me and hold out different leaves and rocks for me to identify for them.

For a short period of time each week I worked in the office. Kara gave me organizational tasks at first, after finding out that I knew how to work Excel. I cleaned up all her Excel files and created a database of all the schools and programs that sign up for educational classes in the park. One week, when it was too hot to keep the campers outside for the entire allotted class time, I helped create fun and educational indoor activities for the campers to do and still learn about all the fascinating plants, animals and boats you can see from the park. The most exciting project I worked on in the office was rewriting the Geology class curriculum. I got to use everything I have learned in my major to explain what the teachers did not fully understand, and brainstorm on how to make the class accessible to elementary school children.

Living and working in New York this summer was a wonderful experience. It was the first time I've ever really been on my own. Working for the Brooklyn Bridge Park Conservancy helped me figure out what I want to do after graduation. I have seen firsthand how important public spaces are for people who live in large metropolitan areas; without parks and other public spaces there would be nowhere for people to escape from the city. Realizing the importance of places like the Brooklyn Bridge Park has helped me decide that I want to work in a field, such as landscape architecture or urban development, that works to transform run-down areas of a city and create a new, beautiful space available where people can enjoy new experiences in their city.