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GRATEFUL GRADUATES

Friday, July 31, 2009 Orange County Conservation Corps will hold graduation ceremonies for a record number of graduates. Both those who are graduating and those who witnessed the transformations of the corpsmembers are beaming with pride in anticipation of the days events.

Francis Warren of Anaheim is a recovering addict and is just one example of how OCCC has enabled at-risk young adults to reclaim their futures by attending school while working on conservation projects like trail maintenance and restoration.

“OCCC is a positive program that works,” said Warren, a graduating Corps member. “For some reason the school system didn’t work for us, but OCCC gives at-risk young adults the ability to earn money while going to school. I never thought I would graduate. Graduating from the OCCC program has given me confidence. I don’t have to settle.”

“I have achieved being a high school graduate and now I am enrolled at Cypress College in their drug & alcohol counselor certificate program. I hope to begin a career in counseling of at-youth risk. My primary goal is to work with the drug addicted youth/population.”

In order to graduate, Corps members must earn 200 credits and pass the California High School Exit Exam. Corps members want and need to graduate because they can obtain better jobs, more money, increase self esteem, and complete a right of passage.

“This is the biggest day for the OCCC all year,” said Jarom M. Luedtke, Director of Education at OCCC. “It is a day where the OC community, students and their families, as well as the entire staff get together to celebrate the true and

genuine success of the OCCC's best and brightest. It is the tangible evidence that the OCCC not only changes lives, but does so in a remarkable way.

"Think of it: The vast majority of these students were told that they would not succeed in life or in school and would probably never receive a high school diploma. This event not only silences the critics and cynics who give up on our precious future (OC youth and young adults), it infuses into every 18 to 25-year-old that is struggling to make his/her place in the county that success is not only possible, it is a fruit of one's efforts at the OCCC. It rekindles that there really is a better choice and that the OCCC is certainly one of the ways, if not the best way, for OC young adults to become the best that they can be."

OCCC's annual graduation is a must-see event that will likely impel, in even the most hardened, a sense of gratitude and the sense of the enormous possibility of at-risk young adults who are motivated and given a venue designed for them to succeed. Sadly, however, due to the major cuts that will affect 42 percent of the overall budget, it will be extremely difficult for OCCC to make such an impact in the future. Now more than ever, it is imperative that OCCC finds funding to help sustain its productive and worthwhile programs.

About Orange County Conservation Corps:

OCCC is a non-profit organization founded in 1993 as part of the Anaheim anti-gang taskforce and is affiliated with the Corps Network, California Association of Local Conservation Corps and other youth service organizations. The OCCC is a voluntary work/learn program that provides an opportunity for at-risk and disadvantaged youths, age 18 to 25, to earn a living while learning valuable employment skills through job training and attending the on-site charter school to earn their high school diploma. Work projects are environmentally-based and benefit the community. Funding is provided through the California Department of Conservation as well as individual and corporate contributions, grants, contracts and entrepreneurial projects. For more information visit their website at www.hireyouth.org.

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Attached: List of Graduates 2009