

Isles interns learn landscaping, build character at the historic Morven Museum and Garden



Interns from the Isles YouthBuild Institute internship program tour the gardens and projects they have been working on for the past 5 week at the Morven Museum and Garden in Princeton on Thursday, July 31, 2014. Andrew Miller/For The Times of Trenton

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Robert Schanck, 22, of Hamilton tugged at leaves on the ground — finally unearthing a carrot and holding it up in triumph.

The carrot-pulling was greeted with applause by eight proud landscaping interns, including Schanck, from the Isles YouthBuild Institute in Trenton. They had planted a vegetable garden and worked on countless other projects during their five-week internship with the Morven Museum and Garden in Princeton.

Every summer for the past decade, Morven — a former governor’s mansion — has hosted interns from Isles, a community development and environmental organization that helps young adults by offering them alternative education and work training. This summer’s eight participants, who range in age from 18-24, are finishing the internship with a stipend, letters of recommendation — and most importantly, say Isles officials — the pride of a job well done.

“What I like about Isles is that it keeps me out of trouble,” Trenton resident Shawn Parks, 24, said.

Parks said that if he had not found Isles a few years ago, he would have wound up in jail. Now, as he completes his second year at Morven, he is proud to go home and tell his 3-year-old daughter about his hard day at work and all the smiling faces that greet him every morning.

“It’s so sweet to see them always come out with a smile,” he said about the staff. “You don’t see a lot of that where I come from.”

The students worked on planting, weeding and landscaping in the garden, built and decorated a rain barrel, and rebuilt an old birdbath. They also built an outdoor communal cabinet for book loans, which the interns requested be filled with children’s books about gardening, about influential black leaders such as Harriet Tubman and Thurgood Marshall, and historical and scientific books.

“The best thing about Morven was just the atmosphere,” said Schanck, who has his own landscaping business in Trenton.

Isles was established in 1990 and seeks to foster successful futures for young adults who did not fare well in a traditional educational setting and did not finish high school.

“It all starts with expectations,” Isles founder and CEO Martin Johnson said, noting that society tends to expect little of young adults like those in Isles.

“It’s our job to create a tough-love environment where the bar is raised for expectations,” he said. “When you meet them and hear their stories, you see their extraordinary potential.”

Isles offers its students the opportunity to be educated and earn their GED while getting hands-on training in construction and landscaping. Most participants, Johnson said, take part in summer programs or internships like the one at Morven.

Another theme emphasized at Isles is community.

“It struck me that the most important thing was teamwork,” Isles internship leader Meg Rich said. “Neil Armstrong took the step, but think about the team behind that step.”

The interns said they leave the program with a new attitude and hope for a brighter future.

“Isles saved me,” Parks said.