



JOHN GASTALDO • U-T

## An overdue overhaul

Urban Corps cleans up one of the city's flammable canyons

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Workers with San Diego Urban Corps began clearing brush from a canyon next to Alexander Graham Bell Middle School in Paradise Hills last week. JOHN GASTALDO

COVER STORY

## PROJECT IS GIVING PROBLEM CANYON A MAKEOVER

Area near school has been plagued by fires and crime

NATHAN MAX • U-T

### PARADISE HILLS

Phillip Cable remembers the problematic canyon next to his middle school.

He remembers the fires. He remembers the out-of-control brush, trees and weeds that hid all kinds of derelict activity next to Alexander Graham Bell Middle School for the past several years.

Now, five years after he

moved on to high school, the Paradise Hills resident is one of about two-dozen workers pitching in to do something about it. Cable, now 20, is among a group of between 20 to 25 San Diego Urban Corps workers clearing one of the city's most flammable canyons.

"It feels good to clean out the area of the school I went to, because when I used to go here nothing ever got cleaned up," Cable said. "It was growing all wildy. Now, the students can feel safer and not have to worry, because everything will be cleared."

Last week, the Urban Corps started hacking

down trees, whacking weeds and slicing down bushes in a 10.7-acre, 100-foot deep canyon adjacent to Bell. The project began with a news conference attended by County Supervisor Ron Roberts, San Diego Police Capt. Tony McElroy and San Diego Unified School District Superintendent Bill Kowba, among others.

Since then, Urban Corps workers have been battling the shrubbery that surrounded a concrete walkway leading from the school at the top of the hill to the street at the bottom.

Students use the path as a shortcut to walk to and

from school, but the area has been a haven for bullets, alleged gang members and drug users, because the brush provided a perfect hiding spot, officials said.

After everything is cleared, "there will be no bushes people can pop out of," Cable said.

That's not even the extent of all the problems. Over the past five years, there have been 18 fires in the canyon, Roberts said. Eight times, firefighters have had to dispatch helicopters to battle the blazes.

The cleanup will cost between \$75,000 and \$80,000 and is being paid with San Diego Workforce Partner-

ship youth job training funds.

"It's a major public nuisance that we're cleaning up," Roberts said.

Pam Sulzbach, a seventh-grade math teacher at the school, said it will dramatically improve the quality of life for students.

Sulzbach said the fires have been a major distraction.

"You could smell the smoke, and the kids used to get all wound up," she said.

Sulzbach added that the added safety of the walk home will help many kids do better in their classes.

"We know of lots of kids who couldn't stay for tutoring if they didn't have a ride

or friend to go home with them," she said. "If they didn't have (that), we just wouldn't press the issue."

Daniel Perez, a former carpenter who is supervising the Urban Corps crew, said the best part of the job is seeing workers like Cable giving back to their community and, in some cases, helping their own alma maters.

"We have a lot of kids from their own neighborhood," Perez said. "It's good to see them cleaning up their neighborhood."

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