

Summer Youth Slays

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This past summer, I was facilitating a team-building exercise with participants in the DCCB Summer Youth program. One of the activities was to create a visual contract with positive characteristics on the inside of a circle and negative ones on the outside. The students, who range from 10 to 13 years old, were generating words and then writing them on a large easel pad. The group had generated a large list and was running out of ideas. One of the 13-year-old girls chimed in, “Slay”. Several of the other children repeated it, “Slay”. I asked, “What is ‘slay?’” She told me it meant “to do good” or “to do something especially well.” She added the phrase “slay the day” as context, which someone had written on her shoe (a very teenage thing to do). I thought about the physical task we had waiting for us: removing invasive species with hand saws and loppers from an oak savanna. The word seemed wonderfully appropriate. I commented that indeed we would be slaying honeysuckle and cedar trees, and she wrote it in the interior of the circle.



Dallas County Conservation Board has offered a Summer Youth Volunteer Program for decades. Upon my arrival in 2015, the program became my responsibility. I started asking about projects the participants had worked on in the past to understand the intent of the program. I was looking for a task that would give participants a sense of accomplishment while supporting the mission of DCCB. At the same time, I had noticed a number of massive “wolf oaks” in the oak savanna at Voas Nature Area. Their lower branches were being shaded by gray dogwood, bush honeysuckle, and Eastern red cedar. By removing the understory, the trees would receive full sunlight and the native plants that had been shaded would return.

I was given permission to go ahead with the project. Multiple things had to come together to have participants: children had to have an interest, parents had to approve, and someone needed to transport them to and from Voas. We had participants from ages 10 to 14 as well as 2 high school students as leadership counselors. They came from all over the county, and most showed up without knowing another soul there.

I don’t know what I was expecting, but I was shocked at how enthusiastic they were about the work. They arrived at 8:00 a.m. on a humid summer morning with eyes wide open, water bottles in hand, and wearing their work boots and gloves. The majority put their heads down and focused on the task. The older children were on their hands and knees making hinge cuts while sweat dripped off their noses. Many times, there was a child on either side of the saw pulling back and forth while a third pushed on the tree so the saw didn’t pinch. *To do something especially well.* I have had multiple children bring no tools to the site because all they wanted to do was to haul brush. It’s not a short distance; they were dragging 6-foot bush honeysuckle, one in each hand, 30 feet up a steep slope. *To do good.* The other phenomenon was the removal of



multiflora rose; a devilishly tricky thorn bush with vine-like stems that like to grab clothing, hair, and skin. *Slay, slay the day.*

Every year parents are shocked their child is working so hard. The typical quote I hear is, “I can’t even get (insert child’s name) to pick up sticks before we mow.” Maybe it’s because they are autonomous and are doing meaningful work. The other parental quotes include, “They couldn’t wait to get here,” or, “They have been talking about this all week.” They not only return each week for six weeks, but most return every summer until they age out.

“Slay” may be the cool, teenage word for “doing good,” but historically it has meant to kill violently, wantonly, or in great numbers. When it comes to invasive plant species, Summer Youth does both.