

THE LEOPOLD WRITING PROGRAM

2018 ALDO LEOPOLD WRITING CONTEST AWARD WINNER



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BEST ESSAY, GRADES 10-12

In 2000, the Jemez Mountains changed forever. Beautiful forests turned to ash in the Cerro Grande fire and with them went trails, animals, and ecosystems. While many Los Alamos residents lost hope of ever enjoying the mountains again, Craig Martin, a local trails expert, realized the landscape could be healed, and with it, the community. When the Forest Service turned to him to lead the restoration efforts, Martin's awareness of the deep connection between human beings and the land led to a success many residents thought impossible.

When Aldo Leopold wrote about the land ethic, he expressed that people with a strong land ethic have a "conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land." After the Cerro Grande fire, Martin knew the Jemez Mountains were ailing, and he began a healing process which quickly gained momentum in Los Alamos. He got hundreds of residents out and working in the mountains; planting new trees and repairing trails. As a result, he strengthened the community that encompassed both people and the soil on which they were working. Through the work, many of the volunteers found a deeper connection with the mountains. Slowly, the scar of the fire faded.

In 2001, Martin helped found the Los Alamos Youth Conservation Corps (YCC), a trail corps whose members became dedicated admirers of his principles. His sayings soon appeared on YCC t-shirts (a favorite was "You can't burn snow") and he became a local legend. In recognition for his service, Martin was named a Los Alamos County Living Treasure in 2012.

Working with Martin for three years, I too came to admire his land ethic. I joined YCC in 2015, a few years after the Las Conchas fire, triple the size of Cerro Grande, tore through the mountains as fast as an acre a second. Watching the smoke plume from my house, little did I know that four years later I would be a part of the burn restoration effort, working alongside Martin to mend the widespread damage.

Martin led the way to heal the land by connecting the community with nature, taking volunteers to plant trees, and helping the YCC rebuild flooded trails. His compassion was endless. "I think I've tackled every mile between here and the rim of the Valles Caldera, some of them twice," he stated, referring to an area of more than 5,000 acres. Now retired, Martin is still passionate about building trails and connecting people with the outdoors, using the local nature center as his outlet.

The fires had an enormous impact on the Jemez Mountains and the surrounding community. But Martin's impact on both was far greater. The seedlings he organized volunteers to plant after the Cerro Grande fire are now almost mature trees, visible on the mountains from all over town. When many community members thought the connection they had with the mountains was gone forever, Martin challenged them to go outside, rebuild, and revive that connection.



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