



As half of park rangers near retirement, U.S. recruits college students

National Park Service recruits college students for careers as law enforcement rangers



Lytia Solomon, left, and Owen McDaniel, dressed in an 1812 Infantry uniform, are two interns in Temple University's new Pro Ranger program, which addresses a critical shortage in enforcement park rangers by guaranteeing Temple students park ranger jobs. They are finishing up summer internships at Fort McHenry. (Algerina Perna, Baltimore Sun / August 13, 2010)

By Lorraine Mirabella, The Baltimore Sun

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Lytia Solomon had never met a park ranger or taken a family vacation to a national park. And growing up in Philadelphia as a "complete urban city girl," she never knew what a park ranger did.

Yet the rising college sophomore with an interest in criminal justice discovered that such a career path could be right up her alley, thanks to a new initiative that's recruiting college students to help combat a looming shortage of National Park Service rangers.

"I like doing right and helping people," said Solomon, a 20-year-old Temple University student and an intern this summer at Baltimore's [Fort McHenry](#) National Monument and Historic Shrine. "I don't want to sit behind a computer."

Hundreds of rangers who specialize in law enforcement in 13 states stretching from Maine to Virginia are set to retire in the next five years under federally mandated age guidelines. That's about half the force. And as one generation of rangers steps down, the park service is struggling to lure a new one to the mostly outdoor, often physically demanding work, which blends police investigative skills with emergency medicine, search-and-rescue missions and firefighting.

Law-enforcement rangers staff 34 of the region's 76 national park units, which can be memorials, military parks, recreation areas, parkways or seashores. In Maryland, those include Fort McHenry, Antietam National Battlefield, Catoctin Mountain Park, Monocacy National Battlefield and Assateague Island National Seashore, among others.

It might seem counterintuitive to be grappling with worker shortages at a time of record-high unemployment. But waning interest in park ranger jobs combined with tough requirements that weed out many candidates has led to a smaller pool of candidates, park service officials said.

"It used to be we'd have hundreds of applications for every position. Now it's sometimes difficult to find a person," said Greg Jackson, deputy chief of operations for law enforcement, security and emergency services for the park service.

He said camping might be on the decline "in these days where everyone wants Wi-Fi."

"Many have not been to a national park and seen what a great place it is," Jackson said.

The park service has been re-evaluating recruitment and training, and this spring launched a new approach with an internship program called ProRanger in partnership with Temple. The park service chose Temple because of its highly ranked criminal justice program and diverse student body, said Steve Clark, chief of law enforcement for the park service's northeast region.

Architects of the regional program, which has 13 interns in its first year, anticipate that it will grow and become a model for the park service nationally as well as for other federal agencies facing baby-boomer retirements and looking for innovative ways to find qualified workers.

"Our hope is to replenish them now with a new generation of rangers as our older generation retires," Clark said.

The program, open to any student with any major at Temple, places students in paid 12-week summer internships at park service sites and then pays for 13 weeks at a law-enforcement academy after graduation. Once commissioned with the park service, they are guaranteed permanent placement as a ranger, a federal job category that ranges in salary from \$33,829 to \$55,413.

Program interns Solomon and Owen McDaniel, a 22-year-old Temple University graduate student, have been working at Fort McHenry, the star-shaped fort that defended Baltimore against the British in 1814 during the War of 1812 and inspired the writing of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Solomon grew up in Philadelphia and attended a performing-arts high school, where she played viola and violin. She admired her elder sister, whom she calls her hero, for joining the military and serving in Iraq, and soon began thinking of how she could help protect people. She began thinking of a career in law enforcement.

At Temple, she took a couple of criminal justice courses and discovered something besides music she could be passionate about. When a professor told her about ProRanger, she jumped at the chance, though she still had no clear idea of a park ranger's duties.

"I thought of a park ranger as someone who rode horses and gave tours," she said.

In some parks, rangers do just that. But the internship at Fort McHenry has given Solomon experience in several enforcement duties, including directing traffic and enforcing the no-bikes rule.

As part of the program, she also has worked in "interpretation," where rangers dress up in period garb to bring history alive and give talks to visitors, as well as maintenance, where she has helped weed and maintain the grounds.

"In the star fort, people come up to you and ask you history," said Solomon, who at first shadowed other interpreters before stepping into the War of 1812-era long dress and hat herself. "You get to explain about the supplies the soldiers used, and how to make soap, and food" that was common at the time, such as once-plentiful oysters.

Next summer, she is hoping for an intern placement at Gettysburg or the [Statue of Liberty](#).

The interaction with visitors from around the globe, though not the primary job of enforcement rangers, often prompts someone to choose the park service over another police agency, Clark said.

"We love working in the outdoors and educating families at overlooks and taking off a Stetson and giving it to a 5-year-old," Clark said. "The rangers have a very special mission" that includes "educating our visitors."

For McDaniel, who graduated from Temple with a history degree and is pursuing a secondary education master's degree at the university, having a chance to protect people and property at national historic sites is a fantasy job.

The Upper Darby, Pa., resident said he grew up vacationing in Acadia National Park in Maine, camping at Assateague Island on Maryland's Eastern Shore and taking his younger cousins on tours of Independence Hall whenever they visited him in Pennsylvania. But he never seriously considered becoming a park ranger before hearing about the ProRanger program.

"I never thought it could be a permanent job," he said. "It seemed like that fantasy job, too unreal."

He relishes the opportunity to put his interest in history to use this summer, giving musket

demonstrations and flag talks, even when it means dressing in the all-wool uniform of an artillery corps soldier in temperatures approaching 100 degrees.

The interns at Fort McHenry will have a different experience, and more interaction with visitors than they would at a larger, sprawling rural park, said Glen L. Clark, the senior law-enforcement officer at Fort McHenry, which draws 650,000 visitors a year.

"This is a very busy park in a small area," where law-enforcement rangers deal with incidents such as traffic violations, vandalism and enforcing rules that prohibit biking, unleashed dogs and operating businesses such as tours in the park, he said.

The internship is unique in that it guarantees a job, and one in the federal government, which has been a tough sector for new graduates to enter, said Rachel Brown, director of Temple's career center.

"The park service is realizing they want to do something creative, and they are putting their money where their [mouth](#) is and reaching out in the freshman year to students," Brown said.

"Not many students come to Temple and think, 'I'm going to be a National Park Service ranger, and I can stay in Philadelphia or Washington, D.C., or Baltimore,'" Brown said. "This program creates that awareness."

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