In 2017, Haley Austin joined the Moab Valley Multicultural Center’s staff as their AmeriCorps Volunteers in Service to America representative. Since then she has been a leader at the MVMC, fine-tuning a curriculum for students and working as a bilingual advocate — and now, she plans to stay on as an official staff member.

“I started learning Spanish when I was three,” said Austin, who attended a Montessori school in Maryland until she attended Wooster College in Ohio, where she studied both Spanish and archeology.

“I love Montessori,” she said of her education. “I think that has really impacted my life and the way I look at the world. It teaches us to be autonomous, and that you are in control.” These skills, she believes, have been directly applicable to her work at the MVMC. “I’m a pretty strong perfectionist, I hold myself to certain standards with my work, and I think that's perfect for my job ... We definitely have leadership, but we have projects, and it's on us to finish them. You have to self-delegate and prioritize, and figure out what it's going to look like at the end.”

With MVMC, Austin has a variety of duties that overlap with her VISTA principles. “The goal of VISTA is to break the cycle of poverty. So any non-profit that works against poverty can get a VISTA volunteer,” she explained. “One of our five service areas is education for youth” One way she is implementing this is by developing a mural curriculum, which will be used to teach children about social justice.

“All of that curriculum, I got to build it from scratch. Social justice is really important to me, but translating that to kid-based learning is really challenging,” Austin remarked. “I designed that whole process. I had to study up, write it out, and then test it. And we're in the testing phase now.”

A curriculum like this is unprecedented in Moab, and evidence of similar programs is rare. Austin's program, once complete, will be designed to serve both Moab's community and others looking for a program such as this.

“We're lucky, because it's not been done before, so we can decide how we want to do it,” Austin said. “Part of this project has been creating a website, so when people look up teaching social justice, that's what people find.”

Austin's role at MVMC is multifaceted, and she said a lot of her job is unfamiliar territory. “Under the general staff, we're all social workers, we're all crisis responders and
interpreters and event planners,” she elaborated. “It's the non-profit, multiple-hats atmosphere.”

In a short amount of time, Austin has helped a number of clients in Moab, and has become intricately involved in the community. Sometimes, she added, MVMC staff can even catch themselves getting too caught up in their work.

“Social work has been a challenge,” she said. “Sometimes we deal with difficult situations that can affect your personal life. Those kinds of things—you internalize that stress. Another kind of learning is learning to separate yourself, learning to turn off everything.”

Austin also said she has been drawn in by Moab’s community.

“I'm definitely staying,” she said, explaining that she will officially become the MVMC's volunteer coordinator. “In March I will be transitioning into the staff, so I'm going to be sticking around.”

Moab regularly gets a number of AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers at its various organizations, and many of them choose to stay once their service is completed. “It's a pattern you see in a lot of non-profits: VISTA volunteers turned staff,” Austin said. “People don't necessarily stay in the non-profit community, but regardless they stay and contribute to Moab. There are so many adventures in Moab, and I'm learning so much at my job. It's a daily learning experience.”

This is the first story in a recurring series of Moab’s “leaders under 30,” a collection of accounts showcasing the young and ambitious in Grand County.

ByBy Jacque Garcia

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