Leon WhiteBuffalo, Joe Cordle and Mark Taylor enjoy the sunrise with coffee before starting work on the trail July 16.

Digging a trail
in memory

Volunteers, federal agencies, donors, a nonprofit all work to create the Skyline Trail.

By Johanna Love

It's hot and dirty work, but you can't beat the views.

At roughly 8,000 feet, along the under-construction Skyline Trail between Snow King and Game Creek Divide, it feels like you're close to heaven. Wildflowers explode from the meadows, and the Teton Range leads the eye northward toward Yellowstone National Park.

Hundreds of pairs of hands have already joined in the building of Skyline, one of the newest and most ambitious trail projects on the Bridger-Teton National Forest. As of July 14, 159 volunteers had donated 976 hours of their time to trail building, along with a Forest Service crew of 11 people, a Friends of Pathways youth crew of nine, a Student Conservation crew of five and three people from the Bridger-Teton's fire crew.

Today seven members of the Montana Conservation Corps are up there digging in the dirt, cutting logs and moving rocks by day and camping by night to minimize their commute time.

The collaboration and logistics involved are impressive.

"So many have put time or sweat equity into this trail," Friends of Pathways Executive Director Katherine Dowson said, "the dreamers, the advocates, the planners, the land managers, the donors, the volunteers, and now the builders."

Partnership between Friends of Pathways and the Bridger-Teton National Forest began in 2000 when they hired a trail ambassador together. The relationship grew from there, with the nonprofit creating its own trail crew and cooperating with the Forest Service on how best to use resources, said Chris Owen, who has worked for both groups but now serves as trails program manager for Friends of Pathways.

Jess Messer works on the Skyline Trail, a 6.3-mile multiuse trail along Skyline Ridge that extends east from Snow King Mountain.

SKYLINE

Continued from cover

Volunteers are a crucial part of the effort, Owen said.

"People really recognize the value of the trail system in daily life," Owen said. "They care about this place a lot. They want to give back to their public lands. Luckily this is a passionate town when it comes to outdoor recreation."

The Bridger-Teton first put the Skyline Trail on the map in 2011 as part of a scoping document for improvements in the Cache-Game area. After much study and public comment the Forest Service approved the trail's construction in 2014, and Friends of Pathways went to work figuring out how to pay for its creation.

Last fall Owen created a budget of $140,000 for the trail project and digging began with a public dig day in September. Earlier this month the final funds were donated.

All ages have pitched in to dig, said Tim Farris, trails supervisor for the Bridger-Teton National Forest. Part of his job is deciding how to use the human power available, whether it's from professional trail builders, teens or senior citizens.

"It's a lot of logistics," Farris said, "to get people in the woods with the tools and knowing what they're doing. You can't give a bunch of little kids picks as big as they are and send them 20 miles into the backcountry. We're trying to set them up for success."

While the Montana Conservation Corps crew is digging east along the ridge, Farris is supervising another couple of crews clearing brush westward from Game Creek saddle in preparation for a piece of heavy equipment to come and dig more difficult sections.

"We're kind of picking away at it from both ends," Farris said.

On July 16 a dozen volunteers headed up the Summit Lift at Snow King Mountain for a day of trail building. They ranged in age from 14 to 73, off to
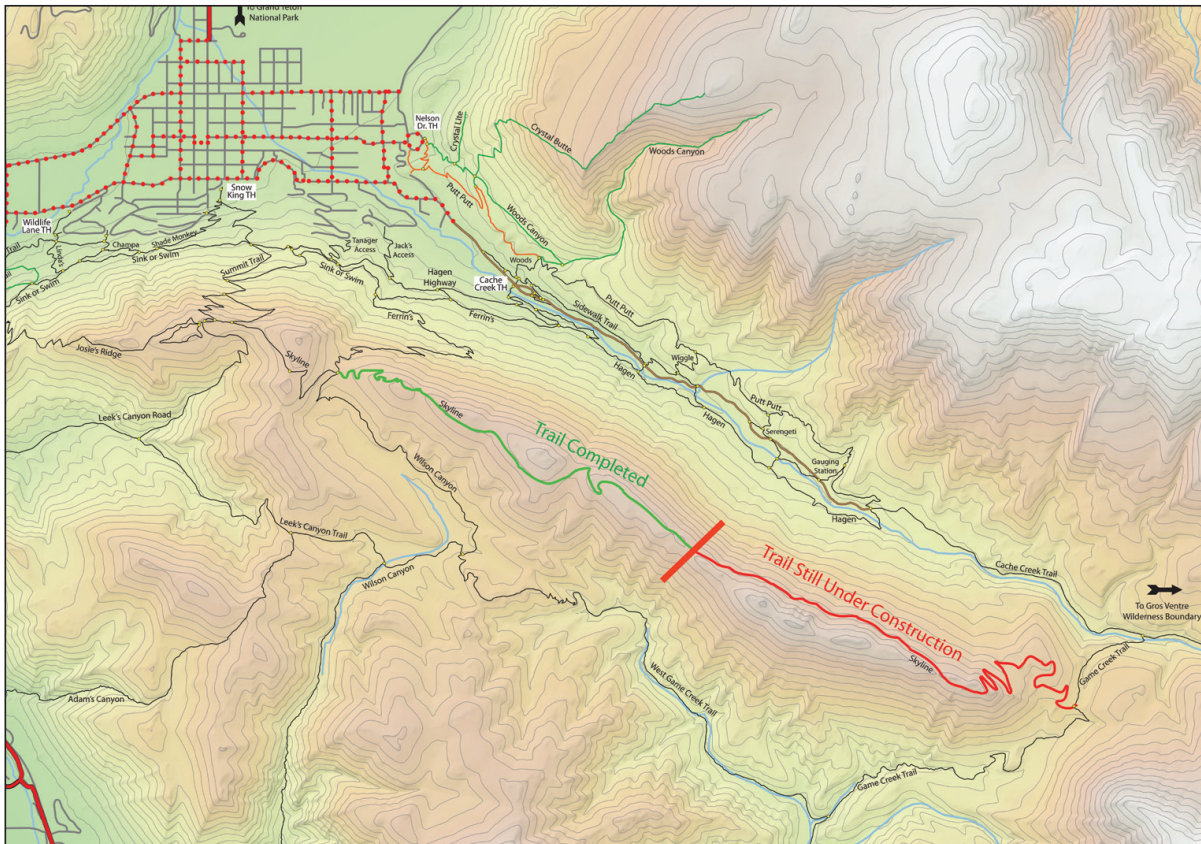
RUGILE KALADYTE / NEWS&GUIDE

Stretching takes place every morning at 7 a.m. before working on the Skyline Trail.

RUGILE KALADYTE / NEWS&GUIDE

Members of the Montana Conservation Corps have tents set up in a meadow along the Skyline Trail. The meadow provides level ground, and workers hike to where they are working each day. On July 16, it was a 30-minute hike.

FRIENDS OF PATHWAYS

This map shows the route of the Skyline Trail and the work being done to complete it before it opens to the public.

Members of the Montana Conservation Corps help build the Skyline Trail, a 6.3-mile multiuse trail following the Skyline ridge that extends eas[...] 2011, and approved in May 2015. The projected budget for the project is $140,000.

A deer watches crew members during their morning stretching routine. Conservationists have worried for years about how the trail might affect wildlife in the area.

SKYLINE

take turns with a Pulaski and shovel and enjoy the outdoors. What they had in common was that they were digging to honor young men gone too soon.

Jackson resident Luke Manger Lynch was a board member of Friends of Pathways who was enthusiastic about the Skyline project. He wanted to dig it in memory of his brother, Matthew Lynch, who was killed in a bicycle crash in 2008. But Luke Lynch never got the chance to stick a shovel in the dirt on what he called "the bro trail." He died in May 2015 in an avalanche on Mount Moran, several months before ground was broken on the project.

"We thought this would be a way to honor both our sons, Luke and Matt," Barbara Manger said. "We want to put in a little sweat to recognize Luke and his life here in Jackson."

Lynch's parents, cousins, friends and family friends flew in from across the country to partici[...] membered Lynch as [...] would show he cared for them, such as just [...] a surprise birthday par[...] miles away.

"People are showing [...] dig the trail, Manger sa[...]

One of those people [...]

> *"Luckily, this is a passionate town when it comes to outdoor recreation."*
>
> — *Chris Owen*
> FRIENDS OF PATHWAYS

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When it's done the [...] will be about 6.3 miles, [...] 8,000 feet of elevation b[...] rin's Saddle at about 7,6[...] Cache-Game Divide at a[...]

Contact Johanna Love [...]
features@jhnewsandgu[...]