The Center for Persons with Disabilities at Utah State University has named the Utah Conservation Corps as the 2013 Community Partner of the Year. Sean Damitz, UCC department director, Kate Stephens, program director, and Ron Vance from the U.S. Forest Service accepted the award at the Logan Ranger District office on Friday, Dec. 13.

The UCC was honored for developing fully inclusive crews that have performed accessibility surveys for the Forest Service, as well as for the creation on an inclusion toolkit that has been distributed to every Service and Conservation Corps unit in the United States. The toolkit was funded by a grant from the Mitsubishi Electric America Foundation and supported by the CPD, The Corps Network and the Utah Commission on Volunteers.

“This is a really neat project,” said CPD director Bryce Fifield during the presentation. “There are two ways that really big things happen: you pass a law and what you get is accessible picnic tables in a gravel area, or you have a situation like this, where there is a collision of a person in need and a champion. You have to have people who say, ‘this can happen.’”

Stephens and former UCC crew leader Andy Zimmer developed the inclusive crew project in 2007 after a 2005 bicycle accident left Zimmer with a spinal cord injury and paralysis from the chest down. At the time of his injury, he was within 300 hours of finishing a 1700 hour AmeriCorps term of service for the UCC.

“Andy was pretty amazing,” Stephens said. “There was no dip in morale during rehab, and he almost immediately started the conversation ‘how can I get back outdoors?’ It made us look at our program, and really gave us that initial kick.

“Initially, we made it up as we went,” Stephens said. “It’s still in its infancy, and there’s a lot of work to be done.”

Before joining the UCC, Stephens founded Common Ground Outdoor Adventures in Logan, a non-profit that provides adaptive outdoor recreation opportunities for people of all abilities, so she had experience with adaptive programs and getting people with disabilities into the outdoors.

“Living in a tent, spending every day outside, working on conservation projects, and being part of a close-knit team … this is what the crew experience is all about,” she said. “This is the life that Andy had come to love and wanted to return to. He also wanted share this experience with other people with disabilities.”

While Zimmer could no longer swing an axe, he still possessed the qualities that made him a good crew leader, Stephens said. The inclusive crew was carefully developed to include crew members with disabilities in a significant and meaningful way. Zimmer returned to the UCC in the summer of 2007 and served as a leader of the first inclusive crew.

Jordan Pease, a social work major at USU, was a member of one of the first inclusive crews and is currently doing an internship with Common Ground.

“I had the opportunity because of my disability to be the guinea pig,” he said. “I’d test the bathrooms and test the trails, on both my crutches and my power chair, to get two perspectives. Accessibility isn’t a one-way street. There are all kinds of varying abilities. What’s accessible to wheelchairs may not fit crutches or someone who is blind.”

The inclusive crews have conducted accessibility surveys for the Forest Service, tested the accessibility of a Forest Service database, helped develop and test an iPad app that provides information about the true accessibility of campsites, and developed the accessibility portion of a community garden.