Chris Johnson has been working as a groundskeeper for ERC Housing for six years. During that time he worked with students to create the college’s first student garden, Ellie’s Garden at ERC. Today, these three thriving gardens serve as models for student activity and creativity, hands-on education, and social engagement. Since helping establish the first student garden (Ellie’s Garden) Chris has and continues to serve as the Staff Advisor to the students working in and with the gardens. He does this mostly in his spare time and his selfless efforts have fostered an important link between student/staff interaction and mentoring in environmental stewardship.

Aside from his work with Ellie’s Garden, Chris is leading a growing movement to establish an arboretum at UCSD that is drawing support from students, staff, faculty, and administration. This innovative facility would focus on sustainability and feature four main components: a composting center, a food forest, a nursery for trees and drought tolerant plants for the campus, and recreational areas that require no water or power. The arboretum would also provide a living laboratory for faculty, staff and students to engage in applied “hands on” learning in sustainability.

To express his passion and commitment to this effort, Chris is already propagating hundreds of trees and xeriphytic plants. While going about his daily responsibilities and duties, Chris collects Torrey Pines seeds. He plants these seeds and grows them until they become healthy little seedlings. He then sells the seedlings at Earth Day with the hope that they will be planted around campus when large enough. Proceeds from the sales of these seedlings go to help support the Staff Sustainability Network and in turn, all of UCSD.

Chris has been an important mentor to students in the Urban Studies and Planning field research practicum. Students go to him for insights about green infrastructure and have done videos on work they have done with Chris’s help focusing on the benefits of campus agriculture (gardens and food forests). Chris has also helped the Urban Studies and Planning Program come up with ways in which its new Center for Sustainability, Science, Planning and Design (SSPAD) can create on-campus research opportunities for undergrads and graduate students interested in landscape ecology and design.

Chris’ efforts are self-funded, and rely on his energy and passion to institute a committed effort to help UCSD achieve its goals regarding Carbon Neutrality, Zero Waste, Community Engagement, and the UC Global Food Initiative. Chris comes in every day, hours before his shift starts and every Saturday, to volunteer his time to work with the student gardens and promote sustainability on campus. The work that Chris has accomplished and the ideas he’s pursing are excellent examples of the University’s Mission and Vision of being a leader in student-centered educations and creativity, and the campus’ evolving goal of sustainability.