The first time I made my way to Connie Vereen’s house on Cherry Ann Street, it was on a bicycle built for two with my mother in tow. Connie stepped onto her porch while talking on the phone and immediately began, with great excitement, describing the spectacle to her daughter on the other end of the line. I later came to understand that Connie’s delight and good humor, on full display as my mom and I coasted to a stop in front of her house, are qualities that are essential to the realization of the park itself. As much as physical labor, it was her good humor, enthusiasm, and, above all else, perseverance that helped to build Cherry Ann.

Cherry Ann is New Haven’s newest park, officially so since Halloween when Mayor Toni Harp oversaw a ribbon cutting ceremony. Tucked into the folds of “New Hamden”—the moniker for the neighborhood and the name of the Double Block Watch group Connie once led—the park can be found at the quiet end of a street that straddles New Haven and Hamden. Trees do not line the street. Children play on the asphalt as cars whiz by. The need for a safe, green space in the neighborhood was obvious.

For decades, a city-owned four-acre parcel on the edge of town sat abandoned and untended. Overgrown with invasive weeds and used as an unofficial dumping ground by the neighbors and the city, it was truly an act of imagination to picture this space as a park rather than a wasteland. But in the months between my arrival in late May as the URI intern and my departure in late August, the community was able to utterly transmogrify the space.

In fact, these efforts first got underway last summer, when the Greenspace Cherry Ann group dedicated its volunteer hours to removing invasive plants, planting

(continued on page 3)
FROM THE DIRECTOR

I’m hoping that you’ll be inspired by the work described in this edition of Urban Issues. Angel Hertslet shares the summer’s transformative work at the park on Cherry Ann Street. Over the past six months we’ve been part of truly momentous change on this 4-acre parcel—the result of nearly a decade of endless advocacy by neighborhood leader Connie Verreen. Articles by Dylan Walsh and Ross Bernet describe, respectively, the flourishing of young urban forester and long-time GreenSkills intern Malik Joyner and new work undertaken in China. While our emphasis is always on community, so often the determination of a remarkable individual brings transformative change. With that in mind, we dedicate this edition of Urban Issues to Chris Ozzyck, who is celebrating his 15th year on staff. (He’s been involved with URI even longer, first as a Greenspace volunteer and board member.) In late September, Marta Moret hosted a lovely party to celebrate the incredible work of Greenspace volunteers. At the event, board member Gordon Geballe noted Chris’s 15th anniversary, and volunteers gave him a standing ovation to thank him for his hard work and dedication. We circulated a notebook for party guests to sign, and we’ve included on page 5 some of the sentiments they shared.

I cannot overstress Chris’s impact on URI. He has trained over 100 Yale interns, and he has provided support and guidance for all of the Greenspace groups. Our work all across New Haven bears his creative imprint as he provides design guidance to our volunteers—whether recovering a vacant lot or adding a planting bed to a city park. His technical field expertise has helped URI to grow and thrive. Whether training interns on correct pruning or planting techniques or training GreenSkills team members on technical field expertise, Chris’s work is enabling and new work undertaken in China.

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Ross Bernet and Angel Hertslet travel in tandem

Urban Forestry Overseas

It started with an email one Monday morning.

Hi Ross,

I’m emailing to introduce you to Yajie Song copied here. He is looking for a student with GIS skills, background in using I-tree (tree inventory) and URI experience for a short-term position.

I will leave it to Yajie to explain the details, but includes a trip to China this month. You have the experience he is looking for, so if you were interested, please contact Yajie.

Best, Colleen

Ross Bernet

It was a lot to take in. Angel casually mentioned that she would also love to go to China. I said it couldn’t hurt to ask, so I did. Yajie invited us both. Tickets were booked two days later and we had visas within a week. Yajie proved incredibly flexible, two days later and we had visas within a week. Yajie proved incredibly flexible, two days later and we had visas within a week.

I hung up the phone from the 10-minute conversation, I asked Yajie to hold phone call with Yajie. I gave my first presentation at 9:30 the next morning in a large boardroom on the 8th floor of a 28-floor government office building. I introduced i-Tree Streets to a group of government employees, graduate students, and volunteers. This software program, developed by the U.S. Forest Service, allows anyone with a smartphone to evaluate the ecosystem services provided by street trees in a given city. A link turns the device into a tree-surveying tool directly from the mobile web browser.

The next day this same group was out measuring trees. A municipal forester accompanied us and helped identify the unfamiliar species. The composition of Guinyang’s street tree canopy is dramatically more uniform than New Haven’s—mostly Magnolias, Sycamores, and Gingkoes. This was a blessing when it came to teaching volunteers to identify trees because a single type would stretch for a quarter mile. But I also saw the limited species diversity as a ticking time bomb: in New Haven—the Elm City—in the 1930s and 40s, Dutch Elm Disease ravaged huge swaths of the urban tree population. There is a serious risk inherent in the overreliance on a few species of tree, and we explained these risks to our collaborators.

Over the 10-day trip, along with tree surveying, we met with local politicians, spoke at a junior high school, and got in a day of sightseeing. Angel, Yajie, and I formed a great team: Yajie had the vision and made the connections with the right collaborators. Angel brought a wealth of knowledge and insight for working with community and volunteers. And I provided the technical knowledge. Thanks to URI, I was offered an unforgettable work trip to China to help establish a street tree inventory using the skills I learned during my time with Greenspace and GreenSkills. It was a wonderful experience, and a collaboration that will continue—a benefit to the citizens of Guinyang, and a benefit to the students of F&ES.

Ross Bernet completed his MEM from F&ES this past May. He first heard about URI when a class from F&ES visited Haiti, where he was living and working for a reforestation NGO. Ross worked with URI throughout his time at F&ES and enjoyed it deeply. You bring special ingredients that make the magic of URI possible. For your integrity, incredible work ethic, generous nature, creativity, thoughtful insights, muscle, smile and intelligence we are so fortunate to have you on our team. Thank you so much for all you have done for URI and New Haven. Happy 15! * * *

Thank you for your commitment to the city—for making things grow.

Ross Bernet

Chris Ozyck

Chris Ozyck marks his fifteenth anniversary with URI this year. Looking back, the organization seems unimaginable without him: was there really URI before Chris joined? He has supported the development of dozens of new Greenspace groups. Through that work, he has touched hundreds of lives. And, above all, he has helped the volunteers have the confidence they need to transform streetscapes and empty city blocks into greenspaces and neighborhood parks. While bringing technical expertise to every project, more subtly and importantly Chris provides the optimism and vision that helps people reimagine a vacant lot as a vibrant park. With that assistance from Chris, volunteers across the city have revitalized neighborhoods and forged bonds that grow stronger every year.

He does this work spiritedly and humbly, and his colleagues, friends, and loved ones want to take this opportunity to thank him for his service. Offered here are a few expressions of gratitude for the tremendous positive change Chris has brought to the City of New Haven.

You are an honorable, kind and extraordinary presence in the lives of everyone you meet. Thank you for all you do and will do. We are all eternally grateful.

* * *

Thank you, Chris, for being yourself.

* * *

You have taught us so much of New Haven how to plant trees, how to take care of them, but also how to build a team, resolve conflicts, and move on. And how to be positive in hard times. Thank you. * * *

What a treasure you are for URI and this city. You are a remarkable human being.

* * *

You never cease to amaze, to improve and perfect, to give more than what was thought to be humanly possible... As a former intern, I know what a great mentor and teacher you are and as a coworker, I have learned what a great team leader, party planner, and community builder, family person and friend you are. Thanks for all you do! * * *

Peter and I have always loved having you as a part of our lives. I remember how you guided us through our extraordinary garden change. You, Rosie and the children are ever in our hearts. Thank you for all you do—for us and for the community.

* * *

Thank you, Chris, for being yourself.
Malik Joyner recalled his first day planning for URI. He was a sophomore at Common Ground High School. He had never planted a tree before, though a previous summer job at Scantlebury Park had impressed him with the experience watering plants and forming compost domats around tree trunks. Early fall, the weather was nice, and he was getting to work on a mild morning near Tweed Airport, three trees waiting to go in the ground. “It was such a slow process,” he said. “I remember thinking I didn’t know how I was going to live through the semester.”

But he didn’t want to drop out; he had never known himself to be a quitter and nor did he want to disappoint his godmothers or himself. He stuck with it. “Two weeks later I started to like the work I was doing,” Malik said. He took pleasure in the physicality. The labor made evenings feel like a reward that had been earned. The importance of the work slowly inflated, became about more than simply a paycheck. He liked how planting was a procession of problems that needed to be solved——how to efficiently dig a pit, how to maneuver the tree and set it straight in the ground, how to engage smoothly as a team. The more he planted, the more communicated the work. “By the end of my sophomore year I loved the work.”

Junior year, the summer after, and senior year he remained committed to URI. He’s planted hundreds of trees, and only three times has the effort failed. “We hit concrete in both cases,” said Malik. “I hated that.”

People change in unexpected ways. “I didn’t really talk as much when I started at URI.” Malik explained. “I didn’t communicate with anybody at all.” But as the struggle of the work forced him to make connections. He started building friendships at Sound School. He started making jokes with the team, slowly taking over jobs and stepping up to lead when the opportunity called. The team needs good and positive energy to get through the workday,” he said. On two different years, when planting at the Long Wharf Nature Preserve, storms rolled in and rain pounded the community, but Malik, his team, and the event continued on.

His schedule is filling up with classes and other commitments, which means that he has less time for URI, but he still tries to plant two days a week. On Sundays, he said, he prefers to rest, “but if work calls, I go.” It’s important to stay busy. “For me, it’s about doing something rather than just doing something.”

Whether a job related to the environment, or specifically to trees, is something he’ll be able to pursue fulltime after graduation is unclear. “I’m just in my freshman year,” he said. “I’m still discovering a lot about myself.” But he will never forget the positive work of URI. And he noted that if a position as director opens up, he would gladly apply. “That’d be great,” he said, joking, partly.

Dylan Walsh is the editor of the newsletter.
Looking at the plans for the park at Cherry Ann with some of the neighbors in 2015.