



Unveiling New Cherry Ann Park

## A BORDERLAND TRANSFORMED

**by Angel Hertslet** 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

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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 Ozyck, 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 overstate 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 building a bioswale, Chris works impeccably and expects those under his watchful eye to perform work with very high standards. His personal work ethic sets an example for all of his colleagues.

Often in staff meetings Chris will explain to our intern team how they will get to witness 'magic happen' as volunteers transform a part of their community. As Chris thanked the volunteers for their exuberant applause, he talked of the hope they give him by their contributions to their neighborhoods. It is truly amazing to be a part of communities coming together to make positive change. It is also a privilege to work alongside such an extraordinary person for 15 years—one who singularly makes magic happen. I am very grateful to have had that good fortune.

Colleen Murphy-Dunning

## Greening New Haven's Infrastructure

(continued from page 1)

a crab apple tree and a bed of perennials, and expanding neighborhood participation. We opened this season on the foundation of last summer's successes. Our Saturday mornings began at 10 a.m. with a bucket of work gloves, a half dozen volunteers, and a landscape of invasive and non-invasive plants growing vigorously toward the sky. Our workdays would end around noon with a pile of freshly pulled invasive plants, a pile of trash, and more than a dozen neighborhood volunteers and high school interns who would then migrate to Connie's for an afternoon cookout.

We moved through the space counter-clockwise, reining in the thorny multiflora rose, the prolific Japanese knotweed, the determined mugwort. Working in partnership with the city's landscape architect and the US Fish & Wildlife Service, we sited and cleared a walking loop path as well as a fishing platform for park goers to enjoy. The neighborhood kids along with their parents and grandparents agreed to the mock-up of play equipment in June, and by August the structures were installed. The open field was re-graded and re-seeded. An urban oasis, one of seven across the city, was planted using native trees and shrubs to provide food and forage to birds. (New Haven is one of eight cities across America to plant urban oases for birds as part of an urban refuge initiative.) The water and electric lines went in, and will soon service the pavilion and community garden slated for next summer.

Each person who volunteered had a particular way of going about things. For example, Connie's daughter, Barbara Ann, was happy pulling invasive plants so long as her phone was blasting the doo-wop tunes of the 1950s. The six-year-old twins, Deon and Deona, collaborated on the project of dragging found trash up to our designated trash pile for pick-up. Eight-year-old Talia was always gunning for a work break to make an escorted walk down to the pond. I'd often get an update on animals the kids spotted in the park in the last week, or if there had been work trucks on-site working on the re-grading or utility lines. The excitement was palpable and each detail was worth discussing.

Dynamics at the weekly cookout were also predictable. Connie hosted. She pulled each person into conversation while also directing the food production. Mr. Mike, grandfather of the twins, would man the



Mayor Harp with children from Cherry Ann at President's House

Photo courtesy of Susan Dodd Gavin.

grill with grace. I asked him once how many hot dogs he had cooked in his life and he paused before estimating "thousands." The kids would fill me in on who was going to Six Flags, what they were planning to wear on the first day of school, and other important kid matters. Six-year-old Soniya whispered to me on more than one occasion that she loved berries and not watermelon. I finally remembered to bring strawberries instead of melon. The high school crew made a huge scene when I admitted that I had never tasted nor even heard of a Red Hot hotdog. In other words, we all found a way to relate to each other, to lightly tease each other, and to encourage each other in the project of creating the park. I had the sense that I was part of a vanishing American phenomenon, that I was welcomed into a neighborhood full of neighborly neighbors who knew and invested in each other, in each other's kids.

By summer's end, Cherry Ann had miraculously taken shape: the playground equipment, the walking loop, the urban oasis, the fishing platform, even the ability just to see across the field where before you practically needed a compass

to navigate. And it was thanks to the persistent, concerted efforts of so many. It was the hard work of Connie, her dogged advocacy that took the form of a weekly visit to city hall over 12 years, lobbying for something to be done with the space; it was the careful planning undertaken by the city's landscape architect; it was the community visioning facilitated by URI's Chris Ozyck; it was the miniature hands and muscles of the neighborhood kids every Saturday, rain or shine; it was the disciplined yet light-hearted focus of the high school crew who worked alongside me for the month of July; it was the bright-eyed and able-bodied MODsters—first-year F&ES students—who provided an influx of enthusiasm and sweat as their orientation began at summer's end; it was the partnerships with the Audubon Society, the US Fish & Wildlife Service, Common Ground High School, Peabody Museum, New Haven Parks & Recreation, and the New Haven City Planning department that grew out of a shared vision. Piece by piece, together, we turned a nameless space into a celebrated place.

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As the Greenspace season wound down and 'thank you's' were shared by all, I had the opportunity to bring my mother for a second time by the park and Connie's house. On Connie's wall hung a freshly framed, hand-written note from one of the neighborhood kids: "Tiu for bid ing tis prk." Connie beamed a smile and translated the message for me: "Thank you for building this park."

That Cherry Ann Park materialized this summer was, in fact, not a miracle at all. It exists because a long list of individuals, organizations, and departments, a list so long I refrain from including it in its entirety, supported a common goal. In some cases, this took the form of financial support; in other cases, this was an investment of time, of expertise, of heart. It is with gratitude that I count myself as part of the process.

*Angel Hertslet holds a Masters degree from F&ES with a focus on community-based environmental management. She counts her two seasons of Greenspace and one semester of Greenskills as some of her most educational experiences as F&ES.*



## Urban Forestry Overseas

by **Ross Bernet**  
 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*

I wasn't fully awake when I first read the email. It sounded a little dreamy...a trip to China this month? I called Yajie. We spoke and it seemed real. I was with classmate and fellow Greenspace intern Angel Hertslet when I called. She likes to tell the story of how, as I hung up the phone from the 10-minute conversation, I asked Yajie to hold off on buying the tickets to China.

Yajie received his Ph.D in International and Development Economics from Yale in 1995. He remained until 2013, working as an associate researcher with a focus on urban environment issues. He is co-founder of the Global Institute of Environment and Sustainable Development based in China. Over the phone he explained that he was inviting me to help set up a street tree inventory in Guiyang, a city in the southwest of China with a population of four million people. He was hoping I could join him there in 10 days.

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, friendly, and able to make things happen quickly.

I recount the timeline because I'm still amazed, despite how absurdly fast everything fell into place, how well the whole trip worked out. I arrived in Guiyang, China at midnight on September 13th, 13 days after my first



**Ross Bernet and Angel Hertslet travel in tandem**

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 value 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 Guiyang'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 Guiyang, 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.*

## URI Champion Chris Ozyck



**Chris Ozyck works magic at URI**

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.

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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!

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

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Thanks for all your work with F&ES and URI student interns. You have made a difference in their lives and your work will be and is being multiplied around the world. I also want you to know how respected and loved you are by so many in the New Haven community. I keep meeting people who know you. You are one of the heroes of our community. Here's to many more years.

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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.

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You have taught 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.

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

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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!

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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.

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Thank you, Chris, for being yourself.



## Out of the Cracks, Into the Branches

**by Ryan Mera Evans** When we think about the word “forest,” what comes to mind? For me, the word summons primeval woods, tree trunks thicker than torsos, winding dirt paths to hidden grottos, bubbling creeks, butterflies, worms, earth. Forest reminds me of Hans Christian Andersen. But this summer, my understanding of the word was destabilized and denaturalized. Through my work with the Urban Resources Initiative I came to understand, more deeply than ever before, the extent to which labor, communication, and human relationships are connected to the trees we see in our cities.

I was one of 32 undergraduate and graduate/professional students who worked in New Haven this summer as part of the Yale President’s Public Service Fellowship (PPSF). Established in 1994, the fellowship seeks to connect Yale students with public sector and non-profit organizations throughout the city. Projects run for up to ten weeks, and range in focus from big-picture economic development initiatives to localized neighborhood revitalization projects. The fellowship provides a stipend to the students, allowing the organizations to receive labor without worrying about financial constraints. Since its founding, the fellowship has funded more than 700 students who have contributed over 200,000 hours of paid community service to New Haven organizations.

As a fellow working with URI, I dug a lot of holes and drove big honkin’ trucks around New Haven. This is what I signed up for. While I landscaped, planted trees, and had conversations across the entire city, the site where I grew the most was the Boys and Girls Club of New Haven.

At the beginning of the season, I opened a conversation with Natasha Huang, the PPSF fellow posted at the Boys and Girls Club. We formulated a plan for students at the Club to learn about plants through planting. For five weeks, I brought perennials, tools, compost, mulch, and trees to the Club, and was able to guide 40 students of color in planting and stewardship practices. After those five weeks, we surveyed the neighborhood for other areas to fill with plants. We identified a few spots that were within a safe walking distance from the Club, but the site with the most promise was located two blocks away, right in front of the Lulac Head Start Center.



Students from the Boys & Girls Club and Ryan move a 300 lb tree to its new home

Before our plantings at Lulac, which serves mostly women and young children of color, the property was a textbook definition of “heat island.” The combination of asphalt, lack of shade, and all-day sun turned the space into a griddle: as soon as you stepped onto their property, the ambient temperature increased by about 10 degrees, raising serious concerns for public health and livability. With the help of administrators from Lulac, we determined the site’s potential for long-term environmental education programming. Shortly thereafter, 10 students from the Boys and Girls Club planted trees alongside the fathers of Lulac preschoolers. This year, we planted a White Oak (Connecticut’s state tree!), a Littleleaf Linden, and a Red Sunset Maple Tree (leaves! color!). When the students planted, they shared stories from when they attended Lulac, and why they thought it important to plant. We also planted a small flower garden in front of a window that the preschoolers regularly look out of, so that images of bumblebees and butterflies float through their early childhood memories rather than a blur of metal and asphalt.

The trees, when mature, will provide substantial tree canopy while also

providing year-round visual interest and materials for student projects. Aside from the ecological and aesthetic benefits, the most exciting part of the work was the actualization of a community partnership with Lulac that will hopefully lead to several more years of youth-driven tree plantings. More than that, the partnership allowed me to understand the ways in which plantings can be used as a means to connect students to good labor and the natural world. When we outsource our landscaping or tree planting to developers or private contractors, we lose valuable educational opportunities. Youth-centric planting programs at once bring students closer to our shared urban ecologies—diffuse forest and crumbled concrete alike—and allow us to shape more holistic ways of being with each other. My summer work with the URI program at large and the Boys and Girls Club in particular showed me, in flashes, that more sustainable, relational, and responsible forms of community development are possible.

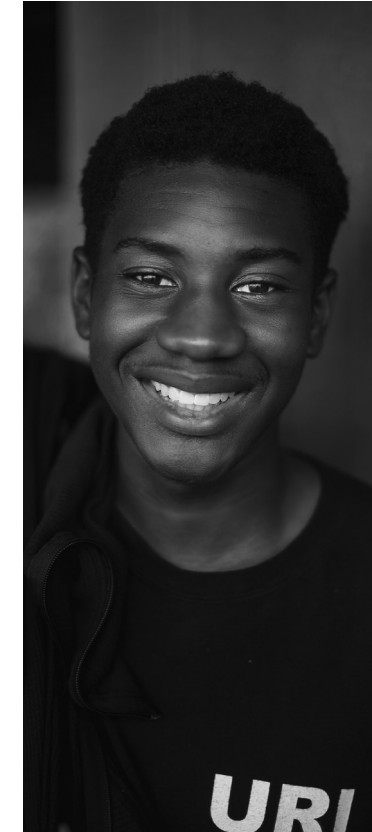
*Ryan is an undergraduate history major from Northglenn, Colorado. He studies rivers, food, power, and memory.*

## Malik Joyner Won’t Stop Planting Trees

**by Dylan Walsh** Malik Joyner recalled his first day planting 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 given him experience watering plants and forming compost donuts around tree trunks. Early fall, the weather was nice, and Malik’s group 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 enamored he became. “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 the soil,” Malik said. “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 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 vacancy called. “The team needs good and positive energy to get through the workday,” he said. On two days in particular last year, when planting at the Long Wharf Nature Preserve, storms rolled in and rain pounded the muddy ground, swept across New Haven Harbor by cold winds. The task felt endless. The more the weather worked to flatten his teammates the more Malik bolstered them with humor, “just to get



Malik Joyner with fellow Common Ground students strike a fun pose with Angel Hertslet.



Ian Christmann took the photo on the left, but not the image on the right

us through,” he said. “We needed that positive energy.” He started this year as a freshman at Gateway Community College and mentioned that, these days, he’s happy to talk with anyone.

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 being out in the streets,” he said. Without these focused efforts—without helping one neighborhood after another on its slow arc toward something better—he would lose his mind. “I need something like URI to keep me busy and focused.”

Originally from Fair Haven, Malik was integral to the Dover Beach project there last summer. Dover Beach is a site along the Quinnipiac River where neighbors planted bird habitat and recovered a neglected underpass, pasting

photos of community members on the concrete stanchions. These days, much of Malik’s energy is focused on the Cherry Ann Greenspace group (see this issue’s cover story). There, he has spent hours weeding and working closely with the community, with which he feels a particularly strong bond. It’s filled with people who want to make a difference, he said, and that brings him back time after time.

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’ll 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.*



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# URBAN ISSUES

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Looking at the plans for the park at Cherry Ann with some of the neighbors in 2015.

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