

URBAN ISSUES

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*Newsletter from
New Haven /
Urban Resources Initiative, Inc.
at the
Yale School of Forestry &
Environmental Studies*



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*Newsletter of the
Urban Resources Initiative
at the
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Photo: Joshua Schachter

SCALE, IMPACT & PERMANENCE

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**by
Keith
Bisson**

Along the Mill and Quinnipiac Rivers – near their intersection with New Haven Harbor – lies the neighborhood of Fair Haven. The history of Fair Haven is vibrant and intertwined with the water that flows along its borders. Oysters helped build this lively neighborhood and the legacy of those times is still evident in the historic homes that line the streets of the neighborhood. This diverse community continues to grow and change and continues to reflect the influence of the waterfront. As an outsider from a small town in northern New England, I was struck by the diversity of Fair Haven, from the liveliness of Grand Avenue to the peaceful green space along the Quinnipiac River.

Eight years ago, a group of Fair Haven residents began planting trees in their neighborhood and formed the Friends of Chatham Square. With the discipline and passion of all successful grass roots movements, the Friends steadfastly worked to green their neighborhood. As David Zakur, one of the early volunteers remembers with a laugh, “we used to get home from work and set a goal of planting six trees by supper.” Like many people now moving to Fair Haven, Zakur immediately saw the beauty and vibrancy of the neighborhood, and after years of renting, recently purchased a home in the
(continued on page 6)



URI

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Understanding the impact of our work at URI, and of the efforts of the neighbors with whom we partner to recover their community's physical environment *and* repair their community's social fabric is not an easy task. Many powerful anecdotes tell the story of our work, but do not fully capture the impact. Yet understanding the impact is critical in demonstrating to funders that their monies have been well spent and to improving our techniques. Monitoring and evaluation helps us to see where our impact is greatest and where we are missing the mark and need to improve. This edition of *Urban Issues* provides some evidence of the impact of our programs. Other crucial measures of our work include the concept of permanence, and this edition of *Urban Issues* also addresses methods we are creating to strive for the permanence of neighborhood greenspace and healthy communities. Finally, our work can be measured by the concept of scale, something that we address in this edition by describing the work of past URI interns who have carried their experiences with them across places and time, and in the process expanded the impact of URI. The articles in this issue highlight not only outcomes but also the hard work of key community members who quietly lead the way in their neighborhoods. These "humble champions" are crucial to our work and make URI's outcomes and partnerships a success.

"Making Progress in Lenzi Park" illustrates one way we are improving our understanding of how to best merge environmental restoration with human wishes and aesthetics. Carla Short describes the reality of how improvements made to a needy public open space occur in stages over time, and how through our monitoring efforts we have identified an area that we as an organization are trying to learn about and grow.

In articles by Bill Finnegan and Emily Sprowls the impact of our environmental education program, *Open Spaces as Learning Places*, is witnessed through children's nature journal entries. Certainly there are outcomes we did not necessarily anticipate, such as the importance of this form of education for children who cope with learning disabilities.

Perhaps most often overlooked, but central to who we are, is the impact of the experience gained by our student interns. Matthew Underwood, a *Community Greenspace* intern in the summer of 2001, shares his personal views on how he benefited by participating in the program. From another angle, our student editor Keith Bisson profiles former intern James Jiler on the influence of his internship on his career. The hundreds of interns who have worked with URI since our inception also demonstrate both the permanence and scale of our work as so many of these interns have gone on to careers in urban community forestry.

The *Community Greenspace* program has worked with nearly 200 groups throughout New Haven in the last eight years. The notion of sustainability is bandied about, but in volunteer, community-based natural resource management this idea is neither well understood nor tested. Through our new Emeritus status for Greenspace groups, described by our Greenspace Manager Chris Ozyck and student Austin Zeiderman, we are devising methods to support the planting and maintenance efforts of our neighborhood partners as they strive for the long term sustainability of their neighborhood greenspaces.

All of these stories create a picture of a diverse and responsive organization with an impact belied by its size. URI thrives on the energy of volunteers and interns and succeeds through the collective will of them all. And herein lies the impact, scale, and permanence of our work as it is done at the grassroots level and shared broadly across space and time. I hope these stories inspire you to imagine the possibilities in your own neighborhoods.



Colleen Murphy-Dunning

Working and Learning in New Haven's Neighborhoods

As an undergraduate English major, the prospect of working one summer for URI seemed like a diversion from my intended academic path. After all, as an URI intern, most of my summer would be spent working in the dirt. But something felt right about it. A common theme in my classes at Yale involved the values people and communities place on the natural world. Nature writing was a focus in a number of my English courses – in everything from medieval poetry to American colonial frontier literature to 19th century scientific works like Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle*. I also visited the theme in history, art history, and ecology classes. URI seemed like a great way to experience firsthand how people's connections to their environment, even the urban environment, still matter in today's world.

I was not disappointed. My work within the urban environment of New Haven reinforced for me that our most basic interactions with the natural world – the act of planting a tree or watering a shrub – and the meanings of those interactions have changed little over time. Since the first human communities were formed, societies have grown and flourished when people gathered to turn the soil with a spade. No clearer demonstration exists of this simple action's power to forge community bonds than what I saw on Grand Avenue, where the often reviled residents of a local half-way house came together and worked side by side with Italian ladies from the neighborhood to plant juniper and sage in weedy curb-strips. One man, the most diligent of the group of ex-convicts, returned on his own to finish the project when he had been released from the half-way house after the first week. With each sedum plant the group placed in the soil, reconciliation flowered, and their community grew with the landscape.

Another project, at Wolcott and Lloyd Streets in Fair Haven, also seemed nearly impossible at first. Yet, despite a language barrier with me, jobs that required long hours, and a block where half the lots and homes were abandoned, the group put in a near super-human effort (laying out new paths in their park and lining them with literally tons of stone dust and rocks) to turn a faltering project into a gem for one of the most blighted areas of the city. Their project was a question of self-determination: forces beyond their control had rendered their neighborhood half-vacant. But they could control what they did with the spaces around them, and they chose to make those spaces into a benefit for the community rather than a grave liability.

One project leader in particular was a personal inspiration, both to me and to his neighbors and their children. This

community leader was a man who grew up in poverty and by the age of 25 was convicted of selling cocaine, subsequently spending 10 years in federal prison.

Far too many people, I believe, would have numbered him among the many lost souls of our country's inner-cities. Yet upon his release, he has done more to increase home ownership, clean up the streets, and chase away crime in his little corner of Fair Haven than New Haven's city government and a number of non-profits in Fair Haven have done with legions of Yale graduates on their staffs. Perhaps most important of all, however, he stands as a public role model for the kids in the neighborhood. As they helped dig holes for new trees on their street, with each turn of the spade they learned what responsible citizenship was without having to make *(continued on page 9)*

by
**Matthew
Underwood**



Photo: Joshua Schachter

Matthew Underwood helps residents create a neighborhood greenspace.

Learning with Nature's Encouragement

by
Bill
Finnegan

There was a flurry of activity at the Nash Street greenspace. Twenty-three fifth graders from a neighborhood school ran around the community garden, searching for the oldest living thing and remnants from a fallen chimney. Having just explained the day's activity to the kids, a scavenger hunt based on slightly cryptic clues, I sat down at one of the picnic tables to wait until a group of investigators needed my help.

A girl of about ten sat down beside me, and asked about one of the clues, "red fruit shaped like a ping-pong ball." We talked about the fruit for a few minutes – how it might taste sweet, or it might be poisonous. Then she smiled at me and rushed off to join in the hunt. As she ran away, I realized that in my previous three weeks of teaching her class about open space in New Haven this girl had not spoken a single word.

Later her teacher pulled me aside and explained that this fifth grader suffers from selective mutism. More than just extremely shy, she becomes completely non-verbal while at school. With a hushed whisper so no one would hear, the teacher commented that the *Open Spaces as Learning Places* program has brought this girl out of her shell.

I have worked as a teaching intern for URI's environmental education program for the past three semesters, but this semester I was faced for the first time with a rewarding challenge: working with children who have special needs. At East Rock Elementary, Carolyn Torello and Judith Dixon have collaboratively taught fifth graders with learning disabilities for the past six years. Their class is completely integrated, although the students are not informed who has been targeted for special education (seven of the 25 kids in this year's class have been diagnosed with learning disabilities).

The conventional classroom environment usually doesn't make learning easy for kids with special needs, explains Ms. Dixon. "For kids with learning disabilities, writing and reading can be a big problem, especially in subjects with more advanced content, like science." The hands-on nature of environmental education gets past these limitations, teaching the kids about urban ecology while increasing their enthusiasm for learning.

Ms. Torello adds that the outdoor field trips are especially suited for kids who have short attention spans and lots of energy. "Getting outside, going to the

park, it gives them something to focus on and something fun to do."

Evidence for this is now more than anecdotal. According to Dr. Frances Kuo, Director of the Human-Environment Research Laboratory at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, contact with nature helps decrease the symptoms of Attention Deficit Disorder. Dr. Kuo recently spoke at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies as part of the Hixon Center for Urban Ecology Distinguished Speaker Series. Dr. Kuo's research in environmental psychology suggests that green open spaces have a restorative affect on attention spans. Additional studies by Dr. Aaron Katcher at the University of Pennsylvania have expanded the positive effects of contact with nature to children with a wide variety of learning disabilities. Dr. Katcher has found that incorporating animals into classroom teaching, a key element of the URI program, decreases aggression, increases cooperation and helps children both pay attention and verbalize questions.

Ms. Dixon and Ms. Torello agree that the URI program is perfect for their class, because it encourages group activities and cooperation, which improve social skills, and prepare the

Photo: L. Maser, teacher



Bill Finnegan helps elementary school children to explore the diverse environments of New Haven.

kids for future real-world situations.

It is no accident that children with special needs are engaged by *Open Spaces as Learning Places*. URI board member Susan Swensen specifically designed the program to tap the different skills and interests of a variety of students. The activities are hands-on, visual and active. Some assignments, including student journals, allow for creative expression through stories and drawing. The student journal gives students the opportunity for creative expression through drawing and story telling. Other assignments include mapmaking, close observation of a tree, and the invention of a fictitious story adapted to their tree. For children who have difficulty

learning through the traditional pedagogical approach, URI's environmental education program gives them another way to learn. It also gives them an opportunity to get outside in the open spaces of their own neighborhoods, and exposes them to the resources of their community and neighbors. This in turn inspires greenspace groups, who see the fruits of their labor being used by local students.

URI created the *Open Spaces as Learning Spaces* to link its *Community Greenspace* program with children in New Haven. Through classroom environmental education and experiences with urban nature in neighborhood open spaces, the program helps form a young generation of

environmental stewards, upon which the protection of urban resources depends. However, this environmental education project is also starting to provide evidence of the positive psychological and social benefits of the pockets of urban nature that result from URI's greenspace program. Dr. Kuo extends the benefits of contact with nature from children with learning disabilities to all urban residents, demonstrating that greenspaces help people to live happier and healthier lives.

Bill Finnegan, '03, is pursuing his Master of Environmental Management and is an Open Spaces as Learning Places intern.

Seeing the Trees in Our Urban Forests

Students in URI's *Open Spaces as Learning Places* program are linking what they learn at school to the greenspaces around their homes in part by keeping nature journals. The *Open Spaces* environmental education program aims to connect New Haven children to their local environment by helping them explore nature around their schools and in their classrooms. This year, participating children are applying their new knowledge and enthusiasm for urban ecology to their own neighborhoods by taking nature journals home and writing about their environment. In addition to giving students the opportunity to develop a connection and an understanding of their surroundings, the journal entries are also used to monitor the participants' progress in science, writing and math.

In their first assignment, each child selected a special tree near his or her home to visit regularly and observe by looking, listening, smelling and feeling. The students also practiced forestry field techniques to measure the circumference, height and crown spread of their trees. The following are

excerpts from the journals of third graders at Worthington Hooker Elementary School and fifth graders at East Rock Magnet School.

Emily Sprowls '03 is pursuing her Master of Environmental Management and is an Open Spaces as Learning Places intern.

**by
Emily
Sprowls**

My smoke tree is a beautiful tree with little puffballs on it. They smell like smoke mixed with peppermint. It is a good smell. The bark on the tree feels like dirt mixed with crumpled up rock.

The leaves are strumming in the wind like the way your fingers move if you put them in a fence and start walking.

The maple looks flaky and is losing helicopters. It smells a teeny-tiny bit like a raindrop.

The leaves are almost the shape of a star. It has so many leaves when it rains you go under it and you can't get wet.

I see stains on the leaves...kind of yellowish-greenish. I saw a black spooky blue-eyed spider. With hairy legs.

The white flower felt like Jell-O. The next day the flower felt crunchy. It also looked orange.

When it is a sunny day, birds on my tree make sounds that wake me up early. Some are making sounds like AWWWWW-, some are making AYY AY!

It has little diamond shapes all around the bark and inside the bark it is green, sticky, slimy, smelly and liquidy.

I saw a squirrel again. It was throwing acorns down the tree that has the bench under it. I used to do my science homework down on the bench. But now I don't exactly really want to.

The trunk has a big circle in the middle - it's bigger than my head.

The tree in the front yard...has red branches and its leaves look like little frog feet put together.

I'm starting to like doing this because there are a lot of interesting things about trees.

Fair Winds Bring Change in Fair Haven

(continued from page 1)

neighborhood. He remains actively involved in greening efforts.

The Friends are still very active in Fair Haven and continue to work with URI and other groups to invest in their neighborhood. Indeed, although their work began in the neighborhood park, over the past eight years it has grown to include greenspace throughout the neighborhood.

Out of the Friends, another group developed with its geographic focus on Front Street, which borders the Quinnipiac River. This area is in the midst of change, with new opportunities developing through housing redevelopment and visions for a more active waterfront. This group developed as Zakur and others saw the need for street trees and greenspace restoration along Pine Street, towards and including Front Street. Zakur had just bought a house on the corner, knowing that “corner houses have the ability to either anchor a community or blight it based on their street face and position of being viewed from many angles.” The area was blighted, Zakur and others saw the need for improvements, and the Pine/Front Streets group was born.

The Front Street group shares membership with the Friends but has an additional goal of restoring green spaces along the Quinnipiac River, particularly along Front Street. Its long range goals include historic signage in the area, restoration of the park at Dover Beach and development of a walking/biking trail to encompass all of historic Fair Haven and uniting existing green spaces on the east and west shores of the Quinnipiac River. The group sees many opportunities and is fortunate to be near the Quinnipiac River Park, a four-acre strip astride the river, which

has evolved from a shipyard to a scrap iron dealer to its present use as a pastoral open space along Fair Haven’s riverfront.

This group recently won a competitive grant to pursue some of its restoration goals. As Zakur notes, “we have a stake in this neighborhood and now possess the tools for real change. If a community doesn’t step forward and make itself heard, then decisions will be made for them. Through the grant, we have realized resources that give us the ability to bring about restoration and revitalization of a diverse and vibrant community along the Quinnipiac riverfront.”

Significant outcomes of this work are the interaction of community residents and greater confidence and ability to take on challenging projects. As the group notes in its grant proposal, “as the group has grown, and we have learned that we too can bring about growth in our neighborhood, we have only buoyed our thoughts and ideas for not only ‘green’ change, but also real community change regarding bigger issues like housing and education.” This kind of change is slow but steady and relies on the work of committed individuals. The Front Street group is demonstrating its ability to have a lasting impact on its neighborhood, which includes a legacy of continued community involvement.

The Front Street project in Fair Haven is a success because of hard work and passion, but also because of strategic partnerships. The group’s recent grant award takes advantage of a program offered by the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), Division of Forestry. Each year, DEP provides grants through the America the Beautiful program as a way to promote and implement urban forestry programs in cities and towns across the state. These grants require the recipient to provide additional funding or in-kind

services equal in value to the grant amount. Support from the Community Greenspace program provided this match in funds and services.

Chris Donnelly, Urban Forester at DEP and an alumnus of the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies, is coordinator of the America the Beautiful grant program, and notes that “America the Beautiful Grant Programs work in several ways. They are very important in that they encourage community involvement – which is to say the involvement of individuals in the community who are willing to take their concern about trees and their neighborhood one step forward. This focus of attention on trees and what benefits they provide – to people, to the environment, to the quality of life – is also important ... finally, they actually do quite a bit of good, in terms of improving the condition of the urban forest and promoting its proper management.”

The work of Front Street residents in Fair Haven is a good example of how this valuable program can work. As Donnelly notes, the “Fair Haven project gives all of the indications that it will be a good one. Chief among them, it has the enthusiasm and direction behind it that comes from a small group of energetic, involved individuals.”

The hard work of these committed residents is demonstrating that strategic funding and sweat equity can help to achieve more than short-term solutions to urban problems. Fair Haven residents are showing that with energy and the right tools they can achieve their goals of establishing a base for the long term goals of their community and show outsiders that Fair Haven is urban living at its best.

Keith Bisson '04 is pursuing his Master of Environmental Management and is Editor of Urban Issues.

Emeritus Groups Blaze New Paths

This past year, the *Community Greenspace* program introduced the status of Emeritus for groups that have moved beyond their initial green space restoration and planting aspirations. As groups successfully completed their original goals, a need arose for assistance with continuing maintenance and activity planning to keep up the aesthetic quality and community involvement within the respective sites. The *Community Greenspace* program has three broadly stated goals: environmental restoration, community building and stewardship. Typically, Greenspace groups receive plant materials, technical advice and intern support for the planting season in order design their own projects and carry out their visions. Emeritus groups still focus on community building and stewardship but shift their emphasis from restoration to program development for the site or working on other neighborhood issues.

Once the group completes its restoration goals and achieves Emeritus status, it is eligible for grants through the Community Foundation of Greater New Haven. Grants of up to \$1,500 are available for Greenspace groups interested in community building and increasing the participation and enjoyment of their newly restored environment. Groups have used the fund for social events, celebrations, after school programs, talks and other activities. Programming is designed by the group and funding can be tailored to specific group needs. In the Greenspace Program this year, 12 groups qualified as Emeritus and almost half applied for and received a grant award.

One outstanding Emeritus group is Park on Nash. To date, the Park on Nash has hosted a pre-teen dance, a potluck dinner and a string quartet brunch concert in a park that was once a vacant lot. The park is now the center of

community interaction as well as a beautiful open space. With other events planned such as a pumpkin carving, a Caribbean music celebration, Christmas caroling and a Neighborhood Newsletter, this group is charting new territory for the *Community Greenspace* emeritus program. Ron Oster – one of the organizers of the Park on Nash – feels that “the beauty of these small community events is the scale; they are easier to do for a relatively few people, rather than hundreds of people. We may not get a whole eight piece band but just one or two musicians who can perform and interact with the kids.” As Ron points out, it’s not the size of the event that matters, but the fact that community activity surrounding a newly restored open space is critical to the issue of long-term sustainability.

The members of the group from the Park on Nash are creatively demonstrating to their neighbors and to URI the many uses of urban open space. Open spaces can be places of community gathering and interaction and, by programming a space for organized or casual encounters, a sense of community can be gained.

The change from a passive to an active space, however, is not always straightforward. A group may have fought to eliminate previous active uses such as drug dealing or loitering and simply want a space that looks nice, without encouraging people to hang out. For new groups, the decision of how they want to use and manage green space for the long term may seem foreign, and every group reaches the point where they must consider “now that we’ve built it, what do we do with it?” The goal of the Emeritus Program is to aid in the programming and designing of spaces for active use by residents in order to encourage the long-term success and sustainability of the space long after the restoration is complete.

URI will work with Emeritus groups to understand better what long-term support is required to sustain volunteer restoration activities. To support these groups, URI can provide access to tools and compost for maintenance and aid in acquiring city and state resources. URI will continue to include Emeritus groups in Greenspace trainings and events and capitalize on their expertise by inviting them to lead trainings and act as mentors and sources of inspiration for new Greenspace groups. The many facets of the Emeritus program make it a valuable means to help community groups attain permanence in their green space projects, thus achieving one more step on the path to restoring vibrant, healthy and cohesive communities.

Christopher Ozyck is URI’s Greenspace Manager. Austin Zeiderman, ‘04, is a Community Greenspace Intern.

by
**Chris
Ozyck
and
Austin
Zeiderman**



Ron Oster, a volunteer with the Park on Nash group, demonstrates how to build a concrete path.

Making Progress in Lenzi Park

by
Carla
Short

Lenzi Park is located just off of Grand Avenue in the Wooster Square neighborhood of New Haven. The park was designed in the 1970s by renowned architect Dan Kiley as a memorial to a local World War II hero, Joseph C. Lenzi. More recently, the park had fallen into disrepair and disrepute and was no longer a source of pride for the neighborhood. Rather, it was a blight to be avoided and feared. For these reasons, local community groups took action to restore the park. Working together, and with the help of a US Forest Service grant, URI and neighborhood residents began studying ways to improve Lenzi Park and at the same time explore methods to best merge environmental restoration with human wishes and aesthetics. The hard work is paying

off and is poised to turn a decaying park into a bridge between communities, both the physical communities of neighborhoods and of communities of people who share space but often do not interact.

In summer 2001, a collaborative team of scientists, community members and a landscape architect developed a plan for the restoration of Lenzi Park with both ecological and human needs in mind. Late this summer, almost a year later but with energy running high, the pieces fell into place. In August three city agencies, the Livable City Initiative (LCI), the Department of Parks, Recreation and Trees, and the Public Works Department joined the effort to make the plan a reality.

One of the biggest obstacles to the

restoration process was the old infrastructure in the park. The embodiment of the obstacles was an enormous handball court with a cracked concrete wall and uneven asphalt paving. Ironically, much of the infrastructure intended for happiness of children was used as a shelter for a variety of illicit activities. All of these structures had to be removed in order to move forward on the restoration plan. LCI contributed to the demolition of the handball court and the removal of some of the other cement structures and the Parks Department was able to remove the old play structures and other concrete debris in the park.

This concrete activity provided just the boost needed to revitalize the process. On the 17th of August students participating in the urban “mini-

Photo: Sara Ohly



F&ES students and neighbors admire a newly planted tree at Lenzi Park.

module” for incoming first year students at the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental studies worked with community members – including Joseph Lenzi’s youngest sister – to plant cherry trees along the future pathway and several shrubs in one of the planting beds. Cherry trees have a strong historical presence in the neighborhood and, according to Sara Ohly, a member of the neighborhood association and an active participant in the park project, “cherry trees have a magical ring, because everyone here is oriented to them. In Wooster Square Park, and Hughes place...they are as much a reason to live here as the pizza.”

Though some of the neighbors were a bit taken by surprise as it all fell into place after a year of planning, they are forging ahead and capitalizing on the substantial progress they have made. On several Saturday mornings in September neighbors raked and seeded the park with new grass. A path was excavated and stone dust laid and raked out by the group to provide a suitable walking surface.

Even before completion of the demolition and restoration, the bridging power of the park became evident. The restoration volunteers received major support through work teams from Project Apoyo, a program adjacent to the park that provides youth with an alternative to incarceration. Youth from Project Apoyo participated in the restoration on four different mornings and helped seed the grass and “liberate” the trees along St. John’s Street, which have been choked by bricks laid tightly around their trunks. After removing the bricks, the group mulched the base of the trees, allowing them to grow into their newfound freedom. The park thus became a meeting place of formerly disparate communities, breaking down assumptions and prejudices and

contributing to the second chance – for youth, the neighborhood, and the park – which James Jiler describes in the article by Keith Bisson on page 10.

Lenzi Park continues to bloom through efforts by neighbors, students, and a diverse mix of individuals. As the community looks ahead to the next growing season it is working with URI to complete restoration of this local gem. More than just restoring a treasured park, the progress in Lenzi Park is an example of communities changing their own neighborhoods for the better and the potential impact this can have on other aspects of neighborhood life. The park can truly be called a “pathway park” in its role as a pathway between and among diverse New Haven neighborhoods. Indeed, the park is a vehicle for a better understanding and communication among communities, where such a relationship did not exist. It is a symbol of hope where hope had been at a low ebb and contributes to what Ohly describes as momentum not only to ameliorate some of the problems the park was host to, but to make it a place



Photo: Sara Ohly

The demolition of this old concrete wall signalled a new beginning for Lenzi Park.

the whole neighborhood can enjoy. Come visit!

Carla Short, '03, is pursuing her Master of Environmental Management and is a Community Greenspace Intern.

Learning from Neighborhoods

(continued from page 3)
the same mistakes their mentor once did – a lesson that stuck longer than the dirt on their hands.

In the end, working as an URI intern helped me to see the urban environment in a whole new light. Before I started, I would have thought the “urban forest” was an oxymoron, but now I know better. My interests in nature and people’s interactions with it were fundamentally changed by my experiences in the program. I learned that it’s the people that are the most

interesting aspect of any environment. Some of the most inspiring people I know I met during my summer at URI. I am not sure they know it themselves, but their effect on me was profound, and I will always look back fondly on my time in New Haven because of them. I can only hope that I brought as much into their lives as they brought into mine.

Matthew Underwood is a senior at Yale College. He will graduate in May with a BA in English. He was an URI intern during the summer of 2001.

There and Back Again: Global to local impacts of social & community forestry

by
**Keith
Bisson**

The work of URI is accomplished in large part through the work of student interns. Many of these interns go out into the world with their URI experience close to their heart and hands and apply it in their careers. In fact, one of the purposes of URI is to provide students with an opportunity for clinical experience in urban forestry as part of their professional education. The Yale community recently welcomed two such former interns back to their alma mater to share their real world experiences. The Hixon Center for Urban Ecology Distinguished Speaker Series hosted James “JJ” Jiler MF ’95 and Erika Svendsen MEM ’93 on Friday, November 1st for a presentation entitled “If a tree falls in Nepal, will a prisoner on Riker’s Island hear it? – The Power of Memory, Community, Democracy & Trees.” *Urban Issues* is profiling JJ in this issue, and will look at Erika’s work in the spring.

To a packed classroom, JJ described his social and community forestry work in Nepal, New Haven, Baltimore and New York City. After a career on Wall Street, JJ spent seven years in Nepal, first as a Peace Corps volunteer working with the Ministry of Agriculture and later with a NGO working on sustainable farming and forestry. Following these diverse experiences, he came to the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies and began working as a community forester and URI intern building gardens and small parks in Baltimore and New Haven.

Today JJ is director of the Greenhouse Project on Riker’s Island, a program run by the New York Horticultural Society. Riker’s Island is the nation’s largest city jail and penal colony, housing between 16,000 and 22,000 inmates on average, most of whom come from poor inner city neighborhoods. In the early 1990s the president of the Horticultural Society wanted to create a prison

horticulture program on the site, where an unused greenhouse still stood. JJ jumped at this chance and saw it as an opportunity to apply his skills and experience as a community forester in a way that could turn what is normally seen as a sink of human and financial resources into a system that could provide resources to the urban ecosystem.

To this end, JJ helped create the horticulture program on Riker’s Island. In his view, the program uses horticulture and crop production as a pathway to develop job skills in the workplace, increase educational science learning and provide a therapeutic outlet for men and women incarcerated on the island. This means, in part, that “by teaching inmates to transform their environment, we in essence are teaching them to see the potential in transforming their lives.”

The prison greenhouse is surrounded by an acre and a half of land that is used by inmates to design, install and maintain a series of thematic gardens, including a bird and butterfly garden, native woodlands, a waterfall and Zen meditation pond, a medieval herb garden, a vegetable kitchen garden, and a nursery site. The inmates produce perennials from seed and support a fledgling tree nursery. Many of the plants grown are brought to neighborhoods in New York City where they are used by schools, hospitals, hospices, community gardens, and libraries.

Understanding that horticulture in jail is not always enough to help released offenders maintain a straight and productive course in life, the Horticultural Society of New York developed the GreenTeam. This program employs released offenders in horticultural projects around the city including its own program at 14

Photo: Joshua Schachter



JJ working as a URI Community Greenspace Intern.

different Carnegie Branch Libraries in low-income neighborhoods across the city. JJ also secures private contracts with individuals, apartment buildings and public housing to keep transitional teams employed. There are currently 15 full- and part-time ex-offenders working for the program. Many of these individuals are looking for school, additional vocational training or long-term employment with other agencies and companies.

The impact of JJ's work is powerful, but cannot always be measured in the sterile language of numbers. For example, in his lecture JJ describes an unquantifiable but nevertheless powerful scene from Riker's Island.

"The other day, on Rikers Island in my acre and a half complex around a small greenhouse and classroom I watched one of my inmates drive the last nail into the roof of a gazebo he helped design and build. He stood on the roof of that gazebo as if it were the Titanic and yelled – to no one in particular – 'I feel like the king of the world.'"

JJ's work mirrors the work of URI. In his experience, JJ notes that success is derived in part from continuity in programs. It is based on dedicated people working long-term and close with residents and sharing a fundamental belief in the human and community capacity to manage their own resource base. This translates into

viewing people and communities as resources and assets, not as resource sinks, as inner-city neighborhoods and prisons are often seen. JJ carries on and manifests this tradition on Riker's Island. As he noted in closing, "perhaps it is all about the metaphorical second chance. Communities, inmates, gardens, and even countries can adjust, correct, take three steps back for every two forward, but eventually get it right to where real progress is made, and the human condition, so tied up to conditions of the environment, truly improves."

Keith Bisson '04 is pursuing his Master of Environmental Management and is Editor of Urban Issues.

seminar series

Notes & News from URI

Natural Development: Towards Creation of a Code A Seminar Series to Explore Sound Land Development Methods

This seminar series and the associated student course projects will be coordinated to explore the establishment of a certification process for ecologically sensitive land development and design. Leaders in the field will present information on how land can be developed following environmentally sound methods on the

path to creation of a new code that would represent a state-of-the-art summary of existing knowledge on best practices for land development in relation to hydrology, water quality, micrometeorology, industrial ecology, energy systems, community ecology, landscape ecology, ecosystem ecology and environmental engineering. The

scientific state-of-the-art summary will be tested on design scenarios to explore the widest latitudes that can be given to design while maintaining natural processes. Commercial, residential and industrial developments will be considered.

Free and open to the public.

The public lectures will take place from 12 to 1 pm on Friday afternoons in Bowers Auditorium in Sage Hall at 205 Prospect Street. Organized by Professors Gaboury Benoit and Diana Balmori with support from the Hixon Center for Urban Ecology. For more information contact Colleen Murphy-Dunning at 203-432-6570.