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URBAN ISSUES

*Newsletter of the
Urban Resources Initiative
at the Yale School of Forestry
& Environmental Studies*



by **IMPROVING OUR LOT** Hilary Faxon

It started because of a shared problem: the drug activity and prostitution in the abandoned double lot on Saltonstall and Lloyd. Adeli DeArce lived next door at the time, and remembers having to yell at the dealers who wandered through her driveway past her playing toddler to the empty house beside hers. Eventually, the young Puerto Rican mother's activism attracted the attention of Officer Crisco, an older Italian-American policeman, and his wife. Though the neighbors had different backgrounds, their goal was the same: keep crime off the street, and turn the lots into something useful.

The solution came a few years later in 2002 when Officer Crisco applied for and received a URI Greenspace grant. The City had since purchased the land and demolished the house, leaving a vacant lot. Adeli and her

mother, Elba, helped Officer Crisco from the project's beginning. They constructed within the first summer a low-maintenance garden complete with nine trees, five rose bushes, and three benches. During the site's first few years, plantings in the lot and on surrounding streets were frequent. Adeli and Elba (pictured above at right) always came out with their neighbors to help.

"When we started the garden, it was pretty much every day," Adeli remembers. She worked hard to recruit more volunteers, especially among her family. There are pictures of her aunts, uncles and cousins getting their hands dirty: "Those were the people who couldn't say no," she says.

Adeli's family has a long history in

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Bleak economic news is no longer news. All sectors today are challenged to accomplish more with fewer resources. Though 2010 was a record year for URI, planting over 1,000 trees with over 1,000 volunteers, 36 teenage interns and 24 adult apprentices, the year ahead will be more difficult as we continue to work toward undiminished results.

The City of New Haven remains a key supporter of TreeHaven 10K, but in fiscal straits, unsurprisingly, public funding for new tree planting experienced significant cuts. In a way, I find this heartening: that the City retained planting as a line-item at all signals a sincere recognition of the value it brings. Positive accounts of the impact of our work are increasingly numerous, and I am optimistic about what we can accomplish in 2011. This issue illuminates the root of my optimism.

Going above and beyond is a hallmark of our URI team: Greenspace volunteers, board members (also volunteers), Yale-student interns, GreenSkills interns (adults and high school students alike), and our small staff of three. This edition of *Urban Issues* captures a few of the heartening stories of individuals who embody our mission of stewardship. Our cover article shares the incredible accomplishments of Adeli DeArce of Fair Haven who has continued to steward a once-vacant lot for more than a decade. And Adeli is only one of many Greenspace volunteers who have long and quietly maintained these public open spaces. The personal commitment they demonstrate to their communities is so outstanding – as they clean up sites in the spring, weed and mow all summer and pick up leaves each fall – that I am inspired every time I encounter them.

Such tirelessness is not only characteristic of volunteers, but is equally a quality of our Yale interns. Throughout his two years at Yale Forestry, Max Piana has tackled every assignment at URI, working both as a Greenspace and GreenSkills intern. His excellence has even garnered attention from the Mayor! Andrew Breck, also at Yale Forestry, devoted personal time outside of work to helping GreenSkills interns in their search for employment; when he recognized he could be of use, he unhesitatingly made himself of use.

The City, too, as illustrated by Margaret Carmalt, has proven its commitment to going above and beyond with its steady and proactive efforts to collaborate with URI, to take seriously our urban forestry initiatives.

The persistence of such amazing dedication deepens our resolve and makes clear that URI is not alone in supporting community-based stewardship. Though resource constraints abound these days, those distinctly human resources of creativity and commitment continue as richly as ever. To this inspiring fact we dedicate the newsletter.

Colleen Murphy-Dunning

Improving Our Lot

(continued from page 1)

the neighborhood. Elba was one of ten children. She moved with her family from Puerto Rico to New Haven when she was nine, her parents seeking factory jobs and the American dream. Adeli's grandfather worked two or three jobs until he could buy a house on Lloyd Street. Adeli today lives in the same house. The family eventually bought two more houses on the block.

Though Adeli spent part of her childhood in Puerto Rico, Lloyd Street was always home. This attachment has motivated her to work to improve and maintain the garden. "There's love for the little land you grew up in," she says, "It's not the best neighborhood, but because that corner was always family...that makes you own the street even more."

Adeli's roots in the neighborhood and love for the garden encouraged her to step into a more active leadership role when Officer Crisco moved out, a role she was able to adopt with ease and natural proficiency. She reached out to her neighbors and recruited across all ages. To old-timers, she knocked on doors and introduced herself as Victor Mendez's granddaughter. With schoolchildren who volunteered, she directed using her skills and background as a teacher.

Adeli can talk, assign tasks, and keep the mood light when in charge, but perhaps her greatest strength is in leading by example. She waters the trees, cuts the grass, picks up the trash. "When we started, lots of people didn't care. They said, 'young girl, you're a fool, why you want to work yourself to the bone, they're gonna rob your plants...'" The site has experienced vandalism, litter and theft. But Adeli keeps going. "And they just see us keep working, and eventually they came too," she says.

The garden holds the memories of the work that went into it and the family and friends who came there to help, sweating, enjoying themselves. Many of the family and friends have moved on or passed away. But for Adeli, the garden remains a haven, a place that brings her peace when she takes her children out to play, toting snacks and a beach umbrella, or when she gazes over the garden from her second-story window. It also



Gazing over the garden from Adeli's second story window.

conjures memories of Puerto Rico – her grandparents' property and the vibrant plants of her grandmother's garden. Sometimes, she says, she sees people go by and actually stop and stare as if to say, 'look what's here!' "Yeah, I did it," she thinks. "It makes you feel good."

In recent years the site has become an Emeritus Group, meaning attention is shifting from planting to stewardship. With fewer big planting events, Adeli and her mother have become the site's primary caretakers. Adeli's attitude towards the site has changed with its evolution and the events in her own life, but her commitment has remained strong.

"When I started, [it was a] cleaning process, an opportunity to plant. Then it became like I owned [the garden]. I went through hard things in my life, I had a year of depression when I didn't want to touch the garden, but said I'd go and do what I could... [it] saved me, it really did, it helped me get through a tough time, not to be focused on

my own problems. With everything I planted, I had a different view of life."

While her care for the garden runs deep and she has no plans to abandon work soon, Adeli is anxious to recruit more help in the future. If she were to move far away, the site would have no caretaker. But she says even if she didn't live in the neighborhood, she would have to come back to visit and work. "Now I'm tied to it sentimentally," she explains. "I work on it because I like it, I sit there and reminisce. There are nice memories. That kind of sticks to you."

Hilary Faxon is a senior Environmental Studies major in Yale College. Besides working for URI, she enjoys researching in the Beinecke for her thesis on depictions of landscape in the American Southwest, teaching health ed at Wilbur Cross High School, and updating her food blog.

A Contagious Hope

by
Andrew
Breck

As a frosty fall morning softened into a bright sunny day, our GreenSkills crew put the finishing touches on some newly planted trees by mulching and watering, recording and tagging. A visible sense of pride and accomplishment flowed through their expressions and imbued their work ethic. These individuals had learned a great deal about urban forestry in a short few months, and they now consistently achieved above and beyond expectations. They smiled and laughed while working together on one of the final workdays of the season.

Nearing the end of a ten-week program, I wondered what the lasting impacts of our work would be. The trees would continue to grow and to bring benefit to the neighborhoods for years to come, but would the crewmembers be able to continue on a hopeful and positive path? I was gratified to see that this internship had made a difference in their lives, but I also sensed the great obstacles that they would each face moving forward.

The GreenSkills program began as an opportunity for high school interns, and last spring was expanded to include adult tree-planting crews. The goal is to plant trees in New Haven while employing vulnerable adults who are trying to restore stability and confidence in their lives. The particular group that I worked with this fall was recovering from substance abuse, and they were about to leave a residential rehabilitation center. This promised to be an exciting first step back into the real world and the beginning of a very difficult transition.

As part of the program we craft letters of reference for all of the participants, and I remember very clearly when one crewmember expressed heartfelt thanks for the reference letter but then paused for quite some time before finally asking me: "What do I do with it?" To my surprise, he did not know how to proceed. Although he had held jobs before, it had been quite some



Andrew Breck of URI's GreenSkills

time since he had done so and he had never used the Internet for job searching. His limited computer literacy, while not an absolute barrier, was a decided disadvantage. I had seen the extra effort and care that he consistently invested in his work with URI, and I knew that he would make a great asset to many potential employers. Without help, however, he would be limited in his ability to locate and to pursue job opportunities. We made a plan to meet, and I helped him to put together a résumé. We also discussed some basic websites for job searching, and we covered the use of email. Fortunately, he was able to use the computers at the public library for these applications.

Of course, the challenges of this individual are different from those faced by the next crewmember, but they all face significant obstacles in rebuilding their lives. Fortunately, the

GreenSkills program provides a positive, empowering outlet as well as an avenue for workforce preparation. They may not necessarily find jobs in urban forestry or landscaping, but GreenSkills Manager Margaret Carmalt has developed the program to relate to an even more broadly relevant set of skills. For example, one of the initiatives that she introduced was to rotate responsibilities within the group so that on any given day one of the crew would serve as the acting manager while another would be in charge of public relations.

Most importantly, there is the sense that this is not just a job. Through interacting with grateful neighbors, crewmembers quickly realize that they are doing a great service to the community. Each may be burdened with regret or negative feelings from the past, but here they have a chance to feel good about the positive impact that they can have on others, and to develop a sense of hope. This intangible hope will not show up on their résumés, nor can it truly be captured on any grant applications for the URI GreenSkills program, but it is nevertheless one of the most powerfully contagious aspects of the program, and a strong source of motivation. On that late fall morning, it was just as obvious as the warming rays of sun.

Andrew Breck is a second-year in the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. He will graduate this spring with a Master's in Forestry.

Rock to Rock 2011 is Saturday, April 30th!



You are invited to join New Haven's largest Earth Day celebration, a community bike ride from West Rock to East Rock. Register now to start raising pledges for URI and win great prizes. For more information and to register, go to www.rocktorock.org.

Above and Beyond

by
Dylan
Walsh

Max Piana is lanky and spirited and sometimes wears the expression of a muppet. He has boyish curiosity and works tirelessly for other people. This has served him well over his two-year tenure with the Urban Resources Initiative, where he started out planting trees with teens, moved this past summer to Greenspace work with community groups, and now serves in a supervisory position. Director Colleen Murphy-Dunning notes that it is rare to engage a student for all four semesters, plus summer. "He's starting," Colleen said, "to feel like staff to me."

Chris Schaeffer, a Greenspace grantee and longtime resident of The Hill, also noticed Max's staff-like presence: of all the interns Chris had partnered with over the years, "Max was the most informed," Chris told me. "It was really good working with someone who had that knowledge base." He also proved to be a wonderful teacher for the neighborhood kids and an ardent canvasser to recruit new volunteers. "I was anxious about going door-to-door at first," Chris admitted. "Max certainly helped me overcome that hump."

His interest in urban ecology arose, of all places, in the jungle of Costa Rica, where Max travelled as a research assistant between his junior and senior years in college. Through an unlikely chain of coincidences Max found himself from mid-May until July 10th living in a hut by himself in the jungle with very limited human interaction—food drops, the rare trip into town. Over one particularly long stretch of fourteen days he didn't see another living soul. "That," he said, "is when it started getting weird."

On this lengthy island of solitude he finished a book every day, including Professor Stephen Kellert's *The Biophilia Hypothesis*, which bore repeat readings. The central claim fascinated him: literally "love of life" or "love of living things," biophilia posits an instinctive connection between people and the natural environment. The power of this thought drove him first to work in environmental education and ecological design, and then to FES, where he hoped to study the idea in greater depth. Naturally drawn to the work of the Hixon



Max letting kids do the work after he's taught them how.

Center, Max met and interviewed with Colleen. "I liked her presence in the interview," he said. "We really hit it off." So he was hired to work with URI. The job stuck.

This year, after his summer experience with Greenspace, a new position has been carved out for Max. He is, so to speak, moving up the ranks: not directly involved as a crew leader, Max now helps other crew leaders. He drives around on Saturdays to check on work and to offer help. "He has the knowledge, the skill, and the experience to know how to deal with the challenges people face, particularly at tougher sites," Colleen said.

Max laughs about the promotion. "It's been nice. I've learned to never hotwire a truck tailgate in the rain," he explained, pausing. "I learned that the hard way."

But he is too modest about the work that he does. This January, Mayor John DeStefano asked URI to provide a thorough inventory of the health of Wooster Square's iconic cherry trees. Max and Chris Ozyck, through the piling snow of January, measured diameters-at-breast height; they checked trunk cavities and measured overstory canopy. They worked through cold and blizzard. The day it was due, Max emailed in the management plan.

A few weeks later, after inquiring about "Mr. Piana's first name," a hand-written note of thanks from the Mayor arrived in Colleen's mailbox. "Dear Max," it begins, and goes on to congratulate him "on a terrific study of the Wooster Square cherry trees." The letter is signed, "Best, John."

Max attributes his hard work, in part, to the conviction of URI. "I admire Colleen," he said. "Her ability to work with both Yale and the City is impressive, and to hold steady her vision at the same time." It's the kind of work he would like to do after graduation, which comes in only a few months. He'll work this summer for URI and Professor Mark Ashton at the Forestry School, and afterward he's interested in moving to a city like Detroit to start an urban ecology program, planting trees with community groups, educating about sustainable design and retrofitting houses using sustainable design practices. He has yet to nail down the details. But no matter where he ends up or what precisely he ends up doing, the mayor of this next city will likely one day inquire about the first name of Mr. Piana.

Dylan Walsh is a second year at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies and the editor of the newsletter.

Making Planting Possible

by Margaret Carmalt We have been lucky in New Haven. For the most part, a thin strip of grass known as a lawn strip hems our streets and sidewalks. These strips capture and absorb storm water, separate vehicles and pedestrians, and, most relevant to our work at URI, provide a fertile and productive place to plant trees.

Budget strains in recent years have, unfortunately, reduced the number of lawn strips in New Haven. Many blocks instead have only long expanses of concrete. So when URI partnered with the City of New Haven to plant half of the TreeHaven10K goal of 10,000 trees, we reached out to the neighborhoods with the lowest canopy cover: Fair Haven and The Hill. It quickly became clear that many blocks in these neighborhoods were unplantable. There were no tree pits or lawn strips. This challenge stirred a new collaboration between URI and the City of New Haven. With the help of City Engineer Dick Miller, new regulations were devised requiring new and larger tree pits, as well as more stringent regulation around the management and care of city trees. This past fall, we were able to complete two

planting projects thanks to these new regulations, and thanks to the great efforts of Howard Weissberg, Deputy Director of the Department of Public Works (DPW). The first project took place on Elm Street between Orange and State Streets. The few trees present on this block consisted entirely of declining Norway maples, an invasive species planted in high number in the mid-1900s. A likely reason for the decline was the minimal growing space available to each tree, which was planted in a tree pit approximately 8 square feet in area—a veritable coffin for a tree requiring ample soil volume to reach maturity. In honor of the namesake of this main thoroughfare through the heart of the Elm City, we brought the American elm back to this block. Through collaboration with the DPW, we created new larger tree pits (4’x8”) and expanded existing tree pits to 4’x8’ as well. Our crew from Crossroads Inc., along with Yale FE&S students and URI staff, worked tirelessly to assist the City in removing 8 inches of concrete and 18 inches of

backfill from each tree pit. They then added new topsoil to each tree pit and planted 11 American elms. The resulting streetscape is beautiful. A block nearly devoid of trees has been transformed into a growing urban forest. The other successful collaboration between URI, DPW, and the Parks Department took place on Cedar Street in The Hill. One resident on the block called in with a simple tree request for his home. He lamented that there was not a single tree on the block due to the lack of planting sites. I encouraged him to contact his neighbors and let them know of the street tree program. He did, and managed to convince nearly every neighbor on his block to request a tree. On November 4th, DPW, Parks, and URI’s crew from Empower Enterprise, along with Yale students and URI staff, arrived on Cedar Street. Again, 8-inches of concrete and 18-inches of backfill were removed, topsoil filled in, and a total of 15 trees planted. The neighbors of Cedar Street were delighted to return from work that day to find a new, healthier, greener landscape.

While there were many individuals helping to excavate and plant the new sites, Deputy Director of DPW Howard Weissberg deserves special credit for blossoms this spring. His flexible and innovative nature was critical in driving the excavation and planting of Elm and Cedar Streets. Without his direction, the roadsides very likely would have remained bare. We at URI, and in the City at large, are fortunate that Howard is willing and able to harness limited resources to produce such wonderful results.

Margaret Carmalt joined the URI team as the GreenSkills Manager in November 2009, after working as an urban forester for the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. She received her BA in Anthropology from the University of Colorado and a Master’s of Forestry from the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies.



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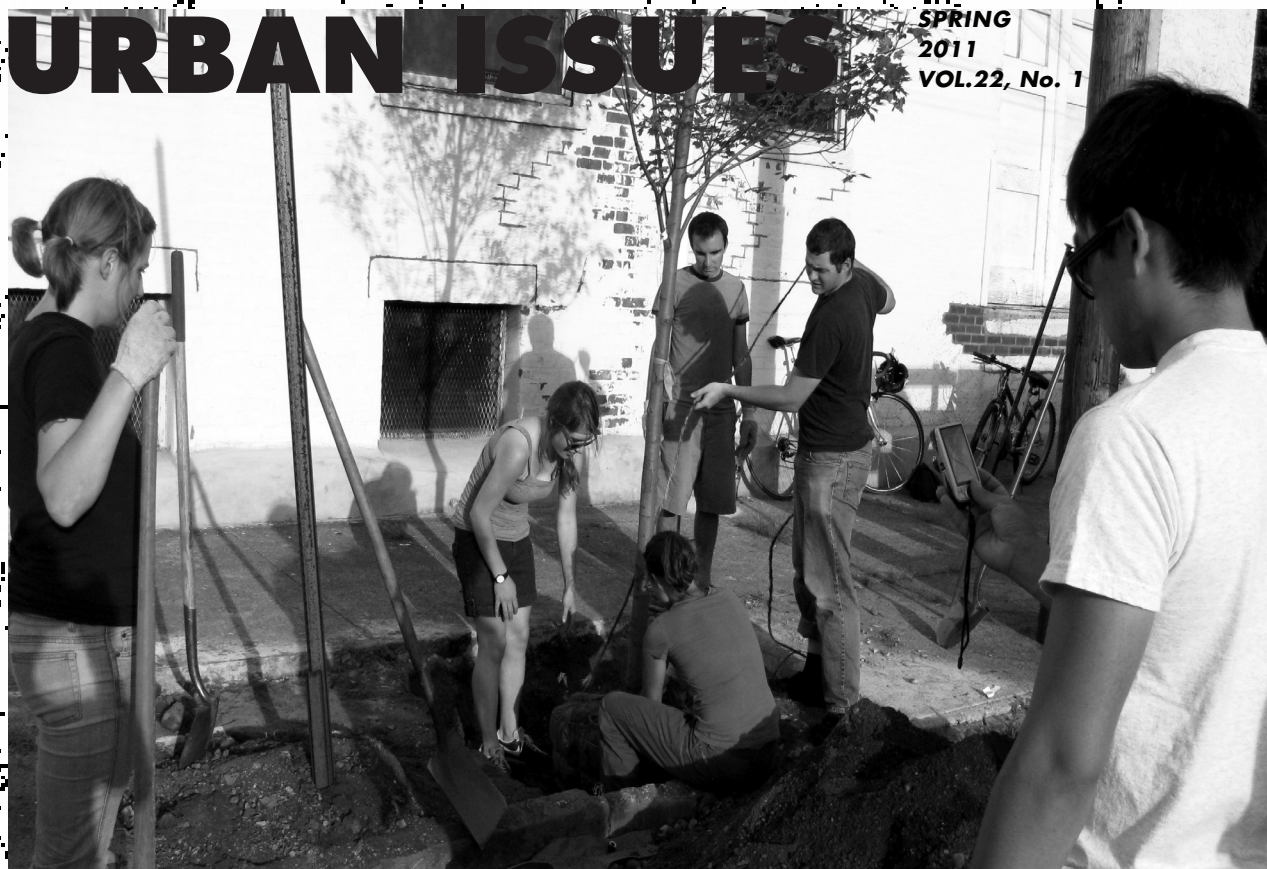
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