

# For his ‘commitment,’ Chris Ozyck named 2020 New Haven Register Person of the Year

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Long time environmental advocate Chris Ozyck stands by the ongoing restoration of the Grand Avenue bridge on the Quinnipiac River in New Haven, Conn. on Dec. 31, 2020. Ozyck has been named the Register's 2020 Person of the Year.

Photo: Brian A. Pounds / Hearst Connecticut Media

NEW HAVEN — For decades, Chris Ozyck has worked to make New Haven a more verdant and carefully tended home, helping tie the city and its residents together into a community.

Across the city he is known for his advocacy — for the environment as well as for people and communities.

In recognition of his efforts, Ozyck was chosen the 2020 New Haven Register Person of the Year. The Register seeks nominations from the community for people who have made an impact, worked for change or pursued a passion that has made a difference in Greater New Haven. From these nominations, Register staff members choose the winner. Eighteen people have been named since 2004.

Ozyck was nominated by Stephanie Fitzgerald, who said that, through his “commitment to people, plants and the environment, Chris touches thousands of people each year” and is “a model of a good citizen — doing what he can to make this world a better place to live.”

Fitzgerald said Ozyck also is a “good city neighbor” who encourages others, and “influences a lot of people.”

“I am always looking for a role model to help me be a better person; that’s what he does,” she said.

Ozyck said he fell in love with nature while growing up in North Dakota, where his family was stationed while his father flew B-52s in the Vietnam War.

All around him, the landscape was flat.

But there were hints that the world could be different — a hill, where they got sand for his sandbox; trips to a river surrounded by wildlife and trees, which felt special. He grew to appreciate the solitude of the spending time in nature and the chance to explore freely.

That affinity grew as his family moved to Candlewood Lake in New Fairfield, which, in addition to access to the natural world, gave him the chance to visit New York City.

Cities, he said, also were fascinating — “another version of a complex ecosystem, where you could be around thousands of people, but still could be alone, and there was always something new and interesting around the corner.”

When he graduated from the University of Connecticut in 1989, he wanted to be able to enjoy in his new home the joys both of a city and of nature. He found that in New Haven.

“I drove from Fair Haven up over Front Street, and I saw the Grand Avenue Bridge, and the waterfront there, and the historic homes. And it had just come through as an industrial part of the city,” said Ozyck. “And I was like, ‘ah, this is it. This is what I’ve been seeking — a waterfront community within an urban area.’ And I’ve been here ever since.”



Long time environmental advocate Chris Ozyck, of New Haven, on the banks of the Quinnipiac River in New Haven, Conn. on Dec.31, 2020. Ozyck has been named the Register's 2020 Person of the Year.

Photo: Brian A. Pounds / Hearst Connecticut Media

After founding his own landscaping company, Ozyck began working with the Urban Resources Initiative within the Yale School of the Environment in 2000, building on his experience working with children in Fair Haven to fix up a garden and create a playground near Wolcott Street. He now serves as its associate director.

During his tenure, he’s helped fix up vacant lots, plant street trees, restore parks, create bioswales — landscape depressions with plants that funnel rainwater to a desired location — and create places in the community. URI helps residents with projects they’d like to undertake in their neighborhoods, providing materials and expertise and giving students experience.

“It was a really great outlet for me to get to play in the city that I love, and meet fantastic people in every neighborhood in the city,” he said. “On my private side, which I still did half-time, I

would work in some of the swankier neighborhoods in New Haven; in the other half of my time ... I got to work with people in all the underserved neighborhoods to help them carry out their dreams in how to improve their local environment.”

In recent years, Ozyck said the initiative’s work on the New Haven Botanical Garden of Healing Dedicated to Victims of Gun Violence, located on Valley Street, has been particularly dear to him.



The New Haven Botanical Garden of Healing Dedicated to Victims of Gun Violence.

Photo: Ben Lambert / Hearst Connecticut Media /

The garden, created by a group of mothers who have lost loved ones to gunfire, features the names of those killed, engraved on bricks in a walkway, as well as the thoughts of the women who helped raise them.

“We are almost complete with it, and it is so powerful and so meaningful — to the families, but also to everybody that comes to the site,” he said. “It’s a great place for conversation about, ‘what is my role in this cycle of violence and what can I do?’”

In his private life, among other projects, Ozyck said he also has led an effort to paint the Grand Avenue Bridge, which held a community vote to paint the span a shade of green that resembles oxidized copper, and activism against the potential expansion of a trash processing facility on Wheeler Street, helping neighbors share concerns about the smell of trash, rats and pollution.

Ozyck said his energy to help build community comes from several places: He was raised in a waterfront community, where people helped one another out; he was a Boy Scout, which “instilled a certain amount of values in me.”

Recently, it’s been buoyed by the goodwill and kindness of community residents.

Ozyck said he has received two kidney transplants in the last seven years, battling “a lot of personal struggle with my health and a lot of worry.”

When he was first in trouble, the list of volunteers was long enough that the transplant center asked people to stop calling. When he was struck with a disease that rendered him in need of another, a colleague immediately stepped up.

“I had two lovely people that stepped up and helped me and my family out,” said Ozyck. “At the end of the day, I never thought I would be in this place. That drives me to honor the kidneys — to take these gifts and to do so something meaningful, to help other people. I’ve always had that in me, but it’s been crystallized through the generosity of these two gifts.”

In New Haven, as he found when he first started working in its struggling neighborhoods and found in a time of need, “there are people who care, and care deeply.”

“(Helping people) to see that they can be positive actors in their community, to make a difference, to work with their neighbors, is really meaningful. And there are dozens and dozens of people, every year, that are out there doing this — and some of them have been doing this longer than I’ve been doing this,” said Ozyck. “Those people are my heroes. I aspire to be like some of them. ... I want to be part of the good people doing good work.”



New Haven resident Chris Ozyck and his daughter Adeline, then 7, were among the first to cross the newly reopened Ferry Street Bridge in 2008.

Photo: Mara Lavitt / Hearst Connecticut Media file photo

Ozyck said he was humbled by being named the 2020 Register Person of the Year.

When he heard the news, Ozyck said he chuckled — only in 2020, such a terrible year on the whole, would he get that kind of positive news.

He noted the year has seen many others work to change the world, from those striving for racial justice; to medical professionals like his wife, who works in palliative care; to others involved in supporting the environment.

There are physical markers of his work out there, Ozyck noted — landscaping jobs, greenways, bioswales, the trees that he used to drive around and point out to his children. They're aspects of the natural world, clearly shaped with care and purpose.

Through them, Ozyck said he hopes to help foster intangible impacts in New Haven — a love of nature in the city's children, who have the chance to experience it as they grow up; a greater sense of community in the city, helping people to invest their lives here; fostering healthier and cleaner lives for residents.

“I think if we can have the culture of valuing nature and the environment, and the economy, and all that sort of stuff, that would be my legacy. I don't want a headstone; I don't want a bridge named after me or anything like that,” said Ozyck. “I just want to know that I did good work and my family knows I did good work, and that maybe I inspired some people to do good work, too.”



In this file photo, Chris Ozyck leads a boat tour on the Mill River around English Station, the abandoned power station, seen here in the distance, in New Haven, Conn. Aug. 7, 2019.

Photo: Ned Gerard / Hearst Connecticut Media

Ozyck said his vision for a fulfilling death has changed over the course of his life, shaped by his experience. He's learned two lessons, he said — you can ask people to do better in this world; many hands make a burden lighter.

“I always used to say that I hoped I died at 90, building a stone wall,” said Ozyck. “But now I feel like, if I die at age 90 taking down invasive vines and trying to save our forest — and doing it with a group of people that are connected to nature, and connected to one another — it's a good life.”



Long time environmental advocate Chris Ozyck stands by the ongoing restoration of the Grand Avenue bridge on the Quinnipiac River in New Haven, Conn. on Thursday, December 31, 2020. Ozyck has been named the Register's 2020 Person of the Year.

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