

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



Photo credit: Anna Pickett

BETTY'S WAY

by David Shimchick

The seeds for this project were planted in 2001 when Betty Thompson, co-leader of the Friends of East Rock Park and former URI board member, was walking from her home in Cedar Hill over to the park daily as part of her recovery from cancer. She was frustrated that she could only go so far before having to turn back. The sidewalk simply ended and she could not navigate the steep descent to the path below. Her other option was to walk the narrow footpath above the ball fields in Rice Field which walkers and runners had created in a stretch that clearly begged for a wider trail, but it was too unsafe for Betty.

The seeds were nourished when a half dozen or so of us wrote

FERP's mission statement ten years ago under Justin Elicker's leadership—a mission to “build connections” and “encourage neighbors to meet each other, celebrate the environment, and become stewards of the park.”

With our assortment of handy tools, abundant energy, and commitment to make a difference, FERP volunteers, Youth@Work crews, and community groups looking for a service opportunity tackled a lot of projects all over the park during the ensuing years, many times under the leadership of a URI intern. As we worked alongside Park Ranger Dan Barvir on monthly workdays, he would often speak passionately about the need to maintain the park's extensive trail system

In this issue:

Senior Intern Essay

5

“Well-accomplished, yet unassuming.”

6

(continued on page 4)

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URI is fortunate to be both a part of the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies (F&ES) and a separate nonprofit, as this uniquely positions our organization to serve as a remarkable bridge. This bridge spanned an impressive group that gathered over the first November weekend including Parks staff, funders, and 25 volunteers whom URI's Chris Ozyck supervised in trail construction.

In his cover article, Friends of East Rock Park champion David Shimchick explains how and why a new Betty's Way trail exists now, through our forging together collective resources.

Incoming Yale F&ES graduate students begin comprehending field skills through park-improvement projects that have been identified by local volunteers as priorities, as Will Klein describes in his article. Our longstanding work around New Haven makes possible this brief insertion of many Yale students in "field modules" to gain vital learning experiences that are also in service to local objectives.

Similarly, in our Community Greenspace program, Yale student interns' support of volunteers who carry out local greening projects also affords those student interns yet another rich learning opportunity. As our founder, Dr. Bill Burch (who initiated the program in 1989), is fond of saying, it is a "mutual pathway of learning," with New Haven volunteers and Yale students fortuitously

learning from one another. URI's innovative Greenskills program is ingeniously structured to create numerous powerful layers of learning and mentoring. URI staff train six Yale graduate student interns who, in turn, mentor 18 high-school student interns. Those high-school student interns with multiple years of experience on a planting crew can then apply to take on a "senior" intern role designed to create new challenges in that position over time, with their assuming more responsibility and leadership. This semester, Sound School student Thayla Lugo rose to the occasion and fully embraces her role of senior intern. With her permission, we have reprinted her application in which she describes how her years of internship have helped shape her positive perspective and her vision of making a difference in the world.

Our staff also continues to discover new greening infrastructure techniques as we experiment along with our partners. I've just returned from a four-day field trip to Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York City, where we had a chance to see exhilarating examples of social-ecological research and urban-forestry operations, often led by F&ES alumni and former Yale interns. Inspiring to us, they demonstrated the impact of how our local work ripples out into cities where these former interns now work. I sincerely hope you can notice the physical difference on the New Haven landscape of our unique learning approach, with unexpectedly well-tended parks nurtured by volunteers, hundreds of newly planted trees, and 22 extraordinarily phenomenal bioswales (roadside rain gardens) throughout New Haven.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Colleen', followed by a long, horizontal, slightly wavy line that extends to the right.

Colleen Murphy-Dunning

Betty's Way

by David Shimchick (continued from page 1)

which was falling into disrepair. But this project remained on the back burner—dormant. It was simply beyond the scope of our hand tools, wheelbarrows, and volunteer labor.

Then this past winter I received an email from Mason Trumble at REI, Recreational Equipment, Inc. He had happened upon FERP's website while looking for an organization that might be interested in a grant opportunity. He asked if FERP had a potential project that would align with the goals of the company and would fit with the recreational interests of its customers.

Out came a plan drawn up last fall by David Moser, New Haven's landscape architect. It was actually a plan to address the severe erosion of the path leading up from the White Trail to English Drive, but it captured REI's interest.

Enter Colleen Murphy-Dunning from URI, FERP's fiscal agent, who with Yale student Katie Murray wrote an eloquent grant proposal on FERP's behalf about a different, but related project—widening the footpath in order to increase access and join communities. REI awarded us \$7,000.

Permissions were secured from Rebecca Bombero, Director of Parks and Recreation and Trees, to have the footpath widened and reconfigured by URI's visionary Chris Ozyck.

Chris and his assistant Matt Viens worked for five days over at Rice Field. They first created the longest stretch of the path across the gently sloping open space and stopped just where the narrow part began. On two subsequent days they chipped away at the steep bank and blazed the trail through to the existing wider section on the other side. They jackhammered away underlying sandstone that was preventing an even trail,



Photo credit: Anna Pickett

Betty Thompson and David Shimchick.

laid in large, heavy sandstone block from the former Yale Boathouse to mark the edge of the trail and retain the bank, and put down thousands of pounds of stone dust.

That was the scene that greeted the crew of over 25 enthusiastic workers who answered the plea to come out on Saturday, November 4th. The crew included Chris, Colleen, and Anna from URI, Ranger Dan and Ranger Wray, Emma from REI, Betty Thompson and her family, as well as veteran FERP volunteers and first-timers. It was an incredibly well-coordinated effort that brought together lots of expertise, resources, energy and the determination to do the tasks that volunteers do so very well: clearing invasive species, regrading surfaces, planting bulbs, picking up trash, and spreading mulch! The result is truly amazing, and it is a testament to the power of cooperation and collaboration.

Technically, the former footpath is an extension of the White Trail. To me, it will always be Betty Thompson's Way.

Best wishes and happy trailing!

- David Shimchick
Friends of East Rock Park

Senior Intern Essay

by **Thayla Lugo**

When I first began the Sound School in my freshman year, I wanted to make friends, and in all honesty it was the only thing I cared for. I wanted to fit in, to be the popular girl, until I joined URI. It was the spring season and I had heard about it through a friend. After that first season I changed A LOT. I don't mean to get personal, but I grew as a person. I cherished things more, the little moments, life, and that being outside made a difference. After that season I rejoined every time. I don't want to let go of URI this year, because it's buried its roots in my heart and made a home. I've become a responsible, caring person, and if it weren't for this program I wouldn't know what I'd want to do today, what I want for my future. I'd be grateful to become a senior intern because I want to give incoming future URI leaders the same kind of feeling—to help students realize how planting trees can impact a lot of people and to begin to know the people you're planting for, the neighbors, the city, the world, you.

I have been a part of Urban Resources Initiative for three years. Every year that passed by I sensed I had more wisdom, techniques, and a hungry, growing passion for change. I think of ways to overcome problems, and I don't give up easily without trying as many ways as possible. I have taught new incomers before with their way around tools, like the pickax, the black bar, and wirecutters. I can demonstrate the steps of successfully delivering the tree into its new permanent home. I work well with strangers and speaking to landowners on care tips and interact kindly with them.



Photo credit: Zach Garcia

Thayla cheerfully guides her fellow intern to drive in new tree stakes.

One of the biggest challenges I've faced, and will most likely face this year, is trying to keep my younger peers motivated to finish the job. Usually our newer employees are tired after planting the first tree and want to take a break and eat or socialize. My best strategy in tackling this challenge is to try and connect with them and make the job more fun and interesting to finish. The best way to motivate them is to show them the benefits, such as a little adventure around the neighborhood. After the first few days on the job, the kids see how their work affects the people and the neighborhood. They learn to do it for their own personal good and for the feeling of achievement and pride.

"Well-accomplished, yet unassuming."

by Will Klein



Photo credit: Annie Stroeth

Graduate students work together to remove invasive plants at Cherry Ann Park during their orientation.

"Well-accomplished, yet unassuming."

-Leah Yablonka on her favorite attributes of Miss Connie.

Sitting on a shaded grassy hill alongside 51 of her fellow incoming Yale graduate students, Leah Yablonka was impressed by the woman sharing her stories of a decade-long quest to garner support to create what is now Cherry Ann Park, complete with a playground, walking path, garden, fishing dock, and open grass for kids to run around. This woman, Miss Connie Vereen, had spent each of her Fridays for the last ten years visiting New Haven City Hall to petition to convert what was a nameless neighborhood dump into Cherry Ann Park, named for the adjacent Cherry Ann Street and accessible to 50+ kids. On this Thursday morning, Leah and her classmates had just finished working to remove overgrown invasive vines from a section of the park, and were in boisterous discussion with Miss Connie on what she would like to see next—a bench so that she and other adults could have somewhere to sit while the kids are playing.

For these 52 students, this August morning was their last day of the orientation course,

affectionately known as MODS (Technical Skills MODules), at the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies. Over the course of three weeks, the 154 members of the incoming class rotated through three field sites (around 50 students per site), with students spending one of those weeks largely in the Beaver Pond Park and the contiguous five-acre Cherry Ann Park as the urban component. During their week at Beaver Pond Park, students were not only exposed to a variety of methods for understanding the social-ecology of the urban environment, they were also introduced to some of their neighbors for the next two years—the communities of Newhallville and Beaver Hills.

At 109 acres, Beaver Pond Park is large enough—both in physical size and in storied history—to provide a great study site to spark a curiosity in the field of urban social-ecology among students. It is the largest green space and water body between New Haven's East and West Rocks, while some of New Haven's most densely populated neighborhoods are its immediate neighbors. Ten culverts fill the park's namesake pond with stormwater runoff from these neighborhoods. But perhaps

most importantly, there are two dynamic community groups, the Cherry Ann Greenspace Group, led by Miss Connie, and Friends of Beaver Pond Park, who have spent decades transforming the park from what was once seen and used as a dumping ground into what is becoming one of New Haven's most well-used treasures.

The week's activities are designed to leverage social-ecological field methods and the students' energy to meet the needs defined by these community groups. On Wednesdays ("Water Day"), students map a raindrop's journey from the top of Prospect Hill through the Rube Goldberg-esque stormwater piping system, then spend the afternoon cleaning up the litter carried by this rain to the outfalls at Beaver Pond Park. But this is more than just an academic exercise; the litter cleanup activity was designed and requested by Bill Bidwell and Nan Bartow, the leaders of Friends of Beaver Pond Park. Having finally created physical access from Sherman Avenue to the park by replacing a chain link fence with a "natural" fence of boulders and street trees, Bill and Nan want to make the waterfront an enjoyable place to spend time, hence the litter cleanup.

Additionally, Bill developed a cleanup methodology to sort and count the types of trash so that the results of this work can inform solutions as to the source of the litter, furthering the park's transformation from dump to treasure.

While listening to Miss Connie on that grassy hill three months ago, Leah Yablonka was struck by two things: 1) community heroes rarely get the attention they deserve because they are not the loudest or flashiest, and for that she admires Miss Connie and sees her as a role model, and 2) it wasn't too much to ask for a bench in a park. It was a fundraiser she helped organize back in her high school, selling a football field's worth of used goods to raise funds to build housing in Tijuana, Mexico, where Leah says she first realized how easy it is to make the world a little better for somebody else. Three weeks ago, Leah held a '90s-themed fundraiser where 130 students danced the night away to Ja Rule and TLC, raising \$700 toward Miss Connie's bench. With its \$2,000 price tag, Leah is already thinking about the next fundraiser—one to bring together, once again, the Yale Forestry and Cherry Ann communities.



Photo credit: Sandeep Aysola

Miss Connie and kids from the neighborhood share stories with the graduate students.



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