



Urban Issues

NEWSLETTER OF THE URBAN RESOURCES INITIATIVE AT THE YALE SCHOOL OF THE ENVIRONMENT



IRIS/URI Tree Ambassador youth with supervisor Leet Miller (center, wearing a hat).

New Partnership with IRIS Creates Opportunities for Youth and New Haven's Tree Canopy

By Anna Ruth Pickett, with reporting
contributions by Leet Miller

The doorbell rings. “Ooh, it sounds like someone is home!” We three glance at each other with anticipation. Finally, a young child appears at the door. “Hello! Is there an adult home? My name is Razia and we are wondering if you would like a free tree.” The child measures us up. We are wearing bright yellow safety vests and name tags, carrying clipboards. I have on a baseball hat and short sleeves under my vest, and Razia and Maya are both wearing flowing hijabs and long sleeves and skirts. The child runs to the back of the house to retrieve his mother.

(continued on page 4)

From **The Director**

We dedicate this edition of Urban Issues to the late founder of the Urban Resources Initiative, Yale Emeritus Professor William R. Burch Jr. I am incredibly grateful for his sincere passion for community-driven forestry, his kind and generous mentorship, and decades of humble leadership. Thank you to Morgan Grove, who kindly wrote *Remembering Bill Burch Forward* in memory of Bill's leadership, in which he beautifully captured that Bill is ever-present in the DNA of URI and in the many of us who had the good fortune to know him. My DNA is marked with a treasure of personal and professional lessons he shared with me, enlightenments that have shaped both my life and my life's work. I also carry fond memories of the numberless visits Bill made with URI interns to see work led by volunteers across New Haven. His reaction was inevitably enthusiastic support—they were indeed all awesome.

After receiving URI's newsletter this spring, he sent me a quick email cheering us on:

If forestry is going to survive and prosper as a profession, this is the critical means—a people centered profession combining forest ecosystems with participation and education. Forestry is then like other professions: rather than serving a few large corporations, it serves whole communities. A really great case—re-envisioning community parks. Great.

Although Bill will miss reading about our most recent work with IRIS that Anna Pickett's written about for this newsletter, I am comforted in knowing that he would have again heaped praise—rooting for us to continue to center community first. And he would have taken delight that a former Community Greenspace intern, Max Webster, has taken the helm of the New Haven Parks Department, described in the interview Roan Hollander prepared.

As our GreenSkills team works six days a week this fall to plant 600 trees, one will be planted in honor of Bill. These small gestures help us begin to express our infinite gratitude. As Morgan rightly suggested, if we continue to pay it forward, Bill will still be with us.



Colleen Murphy-Dunning

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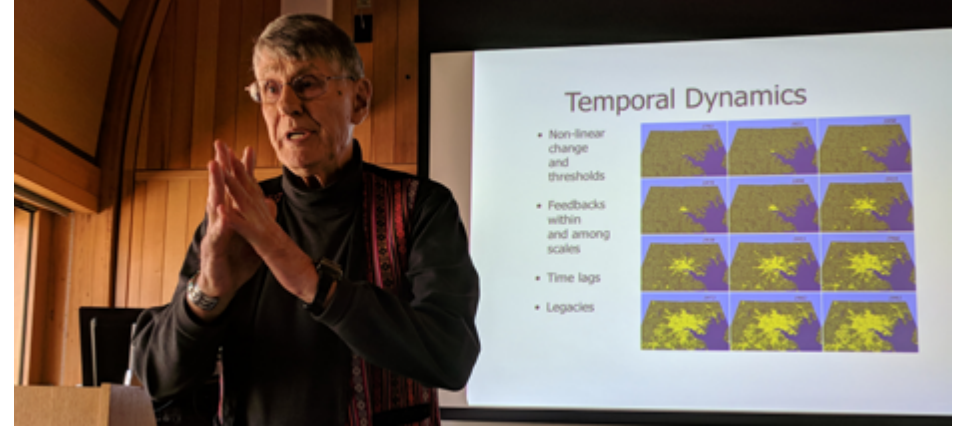
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Remembering **Bill Burch Forward**

By **J. Morgan Grove, PhD.**

Colleen asked me to compose this essay about Bill Burch, who founded the Urban Resources Initiative (URI). What to write? I strongly dislike writing “remembrances,” in part because I don’t like to say “goodbye,” and a remembrance feels like a very final goodbye. In the case of Bill, as everyone called him, I don’t think it’s appropriate (and would be such a Burch-like reaction).

Instead, I suggest that Bill is ever-present and that his disposition is embedded not only in the DNA of URI but in the many of us who knew him or have engaged with URI as well. Bill was kind and caring. He was supportive and relentless. He was contrarian and cantankerous. He believed in and loved people, community, and nature. To him, they were all awesome.

Bill started URI when he was challenged by someone’s simple and fundamental question. Why was Yale working internationally in rural areas in community forestry and not working in his own country, and in urban areas? The questioner’s point was that underlying the specifics, the basic issues, concepts, and practices were the same. And, so, in 1989, URI at Yale began.

Like Mark Twain, Bill believed that school should never interfere with one’s education. In other words, he thought the classroom was insufficient for learning and for training professionals in natural resource management. Like clinical training in law,

medicine, and public health, Bill felt that we needed something similar for environmental professionals. But he believed that URI should be more than merely “training” Yale students or Yale’s “helping” communities.

Bill encouraged students from Yale to engage in mutual respect, learning, mission, and agency with our partners, from community residents of all ages to civic organizations and government agencies. We all have value and knowledge. Bill also loved metaphors, and described engagement to be like playing jazz or a beautiful dance. While Bill did not know jam bands and the Grateful Dead, he might have agreed that “It’s all one song, man.”

I have to admit that Bill would say things that would take me years to understand what he was talking about. And then, sitting in a meeting, walking through a forest, or looking at a vacant lot, I would realize, “Oh, yeah, now I understand what he was saying.” I think many of us have had that experience. Or will.

Perhaps this is why I am reluctant to write a remembrance and say “goodbye.” Directly or indirectly, big or small, Bill impacted all of us, whether we know it or not. Yet as long as we continue to pay it forward, he will be alive with us and the people and places where we work. So, I write this with profound gratitude and appreciation. Thank you, Bill and URI, and I believe we all are just as amazing as Bill thought we were.

New Partnership with IRIS Creates Opportunities for Youth and New Haven’s Tree Canopy

By Anna Ruth Pickett, with reporting contributions by Leet Miller

Razia, Maya, and I are canvassing this neighborhood on a hot afternoon in June. They are two of the ten high school students working with **Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services (IRIS)** whom we have hired as Tree Ambassadors for URI’s GreenSkills tree planting program. Our goal is to identify people who would like URI to plant a free tree in their curb strip and be willing to water it.

URI only plants trees by request and when there is someone willing to water it weekly to ensure the tree survives. Our new partnership with IRIS is thanks to a U.S. Forest Service grant made possible by the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act, which enables URI to plant 500 more trees annually for the next five years. In addition to the 500 trees URI already plants with support from the City of New Haven, the Forest Service grant allows us to double our tree planting efforts, which means we also need to find twice as many tree adopters.

The child returns with his mother, who offers us three cups of cold water. We thank her and explain that we are working for URI and want to know if she’d like to have a free tree planted in front of her home. She is hesitant, but when one of the students points out that the tree will provide shade and help cool her home, the woman agrees to sign up and commits to watering the tree. Not all interactions are this positive, but each time we find a tree adopter our IRIS team gets excited.

Several years of successful canvassing with volunteer Tree Ambassadors gave us confidence to invest in this outreach method. Interacting in-person is a proven strategy for engaging neighbors who would like more trees planted and increased shade in these warming neighborhoods.

Leet Miller (Yale College ’24) served as the primary supervisor for the ten IRIS

students with my support along with help from recent Yale School of the Environment (YSE) graduate Les Welker. On a typical afternoon, we helped students canvass for three hours, which entailed about 2.5 miles of walking. Under our guidance, the youth canvassed for 281 hours and generated more than 290 new tree requests collectively. That outnumbers requests from any other outreach method this year.

Students from IRIS are particularly skilled at community outreach in New Haven because of their multicultural knowledge and language abilities. The 2024 IRIS Tree Ambassador cohort hailed from several countries and is proficient in as many as eight languages: Pashto, Hindi, Dari, Farsi, Bembe, Swahili,

French, and English. Their skills frequently connected URI to a broader range of potential tree adopters. This new partnership with IRIS helps URI more effectively reach and equitably serve more New Haven residents.

Our team uses ArcGIS tree cover data generated by YSE graduate student Erin Shives to plan canvassing routes within the federally determined environmental justice (EJ) communities. The data can help us find streets with the most tree planting opportunities (factoring in existing canopy and street infrastructure). The new requests are concentrated in nine different EJ communities: The Hill, West River, Edgewood, Dwight, Beaver Hills, Newhallville, Dixwell, Fair Haven, and The Annex.

For the IRIS students, the Tree Ambassador program offered substantial work experience and environmental justice career exploration. Knocking on household and business doors in the summer heat to ask about adopting trees was challenging. The students practiced skills such as verbal communication, teamwork,

“The URI/IRIS partnership has been a great opportunity for environmental education for our students.”



Two IRIS/URI Tree Ambassadors help a resident sign up for a tree.

marketing, navigation through unfamiliar neighborhoods, and professional interaction with strangers. Glad that the students could put these skills toward environmental justice work in their city, IRIS program coordinator Erin Kelly said, “The URI/IRIS partnership has been a great opportunity for environmental education for our students. It is so important for students to participate in hands-on work that contributes positively to their local environment, as it introduces them to a whole world of possible career paths in environmental justice.” From just five weeks of canvassing, Erin noticed an inspiring shift in several students: heightened self-confidence and a broader understanding of

career possibilities. “I also believe there is so much value in having the students feel like they have a say in what happens in their local environment, especially those who have maybe just moved here over the last few years and don’t quite feel as if they have the right to these decisions as much as others may. It is empowering not only for themselves and their own self-confidence, but also to New Haven as a community,” she added.

The URI/IRIS Tree Ambassador program will continue supporting youth to integrate into their new communities by equipping them to take part in transforming the landscape with trees and having a tangible positive impact in their new home country.

Profile of Incoming City of New Haven Parks Director Maxwell Webster

By Roan Hollander



Max Webster and the GreenSkills happily pose with a newly planted tree in the fall of 2015.

In a full-circle moment, Yale School of Environment alumnus and former URI intern Maxwell “Max” Webster is returning to New Haven to become the new Parks Director for the city! It’s a story that has been almost 10 years in the making. Max’s love for the city and people of New Haven began back in 2015, when he started his Master’s of Environmental Management at what was then the School of Forestry & Environmental Studies (F&ES) and continued to grow upon entering the GreenSkills and Greenspace programs. His appreciation for urban spaces and their capacity to connect people began all the way back in his hometown of Cincinnati, Ohio.

Growing up in Cincinnati, a rust-belt city once reliant on industry to sustain itself and its people, Max noticed the widespread neglect of green spaces by the city, especially in lower-income neighborhoods. Because of this, a patchwork of small parks and wild spaces throughout the city gained a special fondness in his heart—small urban pocket parks, ball fields, old industrial spaces, and remnant forest patches now overgrown with invasive species where Max describes going to go taste honeysuckle—these were the spaces available and where he built a relationship with and interest in the outdoors. As Max describes, “Encountering differences and disparities

in green-space distribution at a young age pushed me to try to give some kind of control back to communities over the stewardship and care of their spaces.” With this in mind, he started working at the Civic Garden Center in Cincinnati, creating community gardens and green spaces, places for kids to connect with nature, and at their core, spaces designed to have community members involved as the main decision-makers in the process.

At the time Max commenced his undergraduate studies at the University of Cincinnati, he was still trying to put a framework and context around his love for natural spaces and desire to see community-led stewardship. There being no environmental-

studies track at the time, he majored in English, using environmental literature and studying environmental writers to inform how he thought about environmental issues and to learn how to address them. After graduating and beginning further studies at the Yale F&ES, Max joined the URI GreenSkills team and said he quickly “found a vibrant community in the city with a huge amount of engagement and interest in caring for their green spaces.” He continued working with URI doing tree pruning with EMERGE, then as a Community Greenspace intern in the summer of 2016. Max fondly describes working at Cherry Ann Park: “It’s hard to describe how much work was done at Cherry Ann by the community to

clean it up and make it a valuable entity, with significant engagement from children. It put into perspective what committed people can do to improve these spaces and bring their vision for them, what they need, and what can be provided, to life.” He describes how special it was to see by the end of the summer just how excited the community was about the use of this newly stewarded space that their dedication unlocked.

Max is returning to New Haven after working as a Natural Areas Manager for the Chicago Park District, where he oversaw a team carrying out ambitious restoration efforts across the city to restore green spaces in old industrial areas. An essential part of this mission was to make sure every resident had access

to quality natural areas where they could experience native plants, wildlife, and the health benefits city green spaces have to offer—much like the ethos of URI.

He hopes to carry these ideals forward as the new Parks Director and create equity across the city, ensure that people can access parks to support their well-being, and be engaged in a community-input process to identify priorities for the Parks Department. The passion and dedication of the community of New Haven in caring for and cultivating natural areas is at the heart of Max’s eagerness to re-engage with the city—he is looking forward to returning, and URI is so excited to welcome Max back to New Haven!



New Haven Parks Director Max Webster, November, 2024

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Greenspace volunteers celebrate 30 years of community-led greening with URI.