



The URI team celebrates at the end of Rock to Rock.

A VITAL COMMUNITY

by
Dylan
Walsh

Chris Ozyck rarely takes sick leave. He vacations, of course. “Chris makes time for family, friends, his wife in a way that I admire,” said Colleen. “But in 15 years working with URI he never really took sick days.”

This February forced a few when he had both of his kidneys removed, leaving a 14-inch scar up the center of his stomach. His daughters, ages 14 and 12, labeled it “the worm.” Each of his kidneys had swollen to 8 pounds—a normal adult kidney weighs about one quarter-pound—and they were pressing on his lungs, giving him back pain, making it difficult to bend down. He’d been diagnosed with polycystic kidney disease (PKD) five years before on a morning that started like any other morning: he awoke, he made his way to the bathroom. He had a seizure.

He was supposed to lead a workshop for URI that day. His first words after regaining consciousness: “Call Colleen!”

PKD is rooted in bad genes and, over time, Chris’s kidney function declined, first slowly, then rapidly. In September of 2012 his doctors rather abruptly notified him that he should be ready for a transplant in the coming months. “It’s funny to think that I was always The Guy,” said Chris. “I could do anything, anywhere, and all of a sudden I became a different person.”

He has a squinting aspect that reflects an almost permanent smile. He has a bearlike sturdiness, a deep geniality, and he has always been independent. “I used to be less empathetic, just figured nature would take its course,” said Chris. Having children softened him.

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Collected here are stories of inspiration, generosity, and hope, stories of the remarkable individuals who give tirelessly and without expectation to their communities. For years I have been humbled by these volunteers.

URI interns Bailey, Gina, and Sumana focus on the work of Stacy Spells, Ed Rodriguez, and Latoya Agnew. These three have extended themselves fully, giving time and energy to their neighbors. These are the people who have helped the Greenspace program become what it is today: 19 years running, nearly 1,000 volunteers working annually to make the neighborhoods of New Haven greener, safer, and better connected to each other and to the natural world around them. Told together, these stories wind the disparate threads of community into a single, stronger cord.

On the cover, our editor writes about URI Associate Director Chris Ozyck. When Chris was diagnosed with polycystic kidney disease, when he learned and shared that, in the future, he would lose both of his kidneys and need a donor to avoid lifelong dialysis, I was confident that there would be a queue of supporters. Chris has been an extraordinarily generous volunteer, offering endless assistance to the city. Many have witnessed his selfless acts. Surely, the spirit of this disposition would return through somebody's willingness to give him a kidney.

Kim Stoner courageously stepped forward. Kim is a hero to so many, including me, with her life-giving donation. She inspires us all to make a difference and, like Ed, Stacy, and Latoya, to act on behalf of others. We can drive a neighbor's son to school, help with voter registration, plant a tree, or be an organ donor. In any number of ways, we can become closer to the people around us.

"I'm very fortunate that I can do something that is going to take maybe three weeks out of my life and that will make such a difference in [Chris's] life and his family's," noted Kim after the transplant. "And the circles go out from there." With each act of kindness, we build stronger ties and more resilient communities—we inspire kindness in others.

Colleen Murphy-Dunning

A Vital Community

(continued from page 1)

For years he devoted his time to the community of Fair Haven, where he lived. He recruited local kids to help build a playground on a vacant lot, competing for turf with the Latin Kings. (They assumed he was a cop and left him alone.) After attending a local meeting of environmental advocates he joined the URI board, and later took his position as Greenspace manager.

"Colleen is the reason I've stayed all these years," said Chris. As coworkers, they have an uncommon relationship. When Chris announced that he would need a kidney both Colleen and her husband jumped in line, though neither was a medical match. Chris has O-negative blood, which makes him, fittingly, a universal donor: he can give to anyone, but he can only receive from other O-types.

A friend of Chris's drafted and sent an email on his behalf. It branched outward from his friends and acquaintances, who forwarded the message to their friends and acquaintances. The response overwhelmed the transplant coordination nurse—what's normally a trickle of volunteers from immediate family was instead a great flood of phone calls. The transplant center requested that Chris pause his outreach efforts. And yet two weeks before the removal of his kidneys—the first stage in a two-stage process—Chris still hadn't received confirmation of a matching donor. He was unsure if he could move ahead.

A firewall separates recipients from potential donors, affording the donor anonymity throughout the testing process and in the final decision. Chris had heard from many who were not good matches, but he was waiting for a different message. The transplant nurse had hinted that a donor might soon step forward.

His wife, Rosemary, was in Stop and Shop at eight in the morning on a Sunday when she answered a phone call from her friend, Tracy. "Initially, I wasn't sure if I was even going to pick up," she said. I really want to talk to you about someone I know who's interested in helping Chris, said Tracy. That's fantastic, but, so you know, said Rosemary, we heard there's somebody who may be ready to go. We've just been waiting for her call. "Well," said Tracy, "this is that call." Rosemary was in tears in the checkout line under the bright fluorescent lights.

Tracy was calling on behalf of another friend of hers, Kim Stoner, an entomologist at the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station who had volunteered, matched, and consented. "I didn't—in a way, I still don't—know Chris all that well," Kim explained.

The two of them had crossed paths here and there at community meetings about bugs, soil, the environment. One day, an email arrived in Kim's inbox: "Chris Ozyck is the kind of man who would give you a kidney if you needed it," read the opening. "But he can't." Kim forwarded the email to the Quaker meeting to which she belongs then realized her own potential to be a donor. She called the transplant center. They told her that other volunteers preceded her in queue, which, she admits, was something of a relief. But she received a return call and after a battery of medical tests Kim emerged as the best prospect. She had never in her life undergone surgery.

"Before, I kind of had this idea that a community of people could depend on each other when somebody was in need, that there is a community of gifts that people give each other," said Kim. "I feel like this really put the whole idea into practice."

The procedure was easy compared to the singular act of commitment. As a scientist, she weighed and considered carefully. Kim was familiar with the disease through a close friend whose family suffered from PKD. She sought guidance from the clearness committee, as it's called, of her Quaker meeting. "We sat together, as Quakers do, mostly in silence," she said. One member of the committee who was a nurse raised long-term considerations. Kim emerged from the meeting sure of herself and of the course of her life, merged deeply now with the course of Chris's.

"When I first visited the Ozycks, Chris asked me if I had any reservations," Kim recalled. "I said no. I didn't want to come by and say I *might* give you a kidney." The transplant took place on Thursday, March 28th. That night, or perhaps the night after, Chris visited Kim in her room wearing his thin hospital gown, supported by the rolling metal stand that carried, like strange fruit, his IVs and monitors. He

said hello, thanked her, let her know that the kidney was functioning wonderfully. "I wanted to go and see her and see how she was faring," said Chris.

Kim walked out of the hospital Saturday morning. Chris left soon after, in record time.

Less than one month later, the two of them sat together in a pedicab for the Rock to Rock Earth Day Ride (see back cover). "People tell me that I should slow down a little bit," says Chris. "But the reason you get a kidney transplant is so that you can live your life, and that's what I want to do. I appreciated going on vacation this summer, being able to swim with my kids, sail with my kids, to bike ride with my wife, and not be encumbered. Living a life unencumbered again is just a great gift."

He named the kidney Vivian, which traces back to Latin *vivus*. He is regularly reminded of the words of his mother, a special education worker who noted that everybody is temporarily-abled. At some point, we lose that—all of us. Chris's bell tolled early.

Yes, he did take sick leave after the surgeries, but Colleen qualifies the point. He never *really* stopped working. She described the trainings he ran while freighted with his swollen kidneys, the meetings he had between surgeries and while on dialysis—machines beeping, doctors interrupting. He returned to URI in time for May's inaugural Greenspace planting. "To stay working is important for him. It's a part of who he is," said Colleen.

He's joined another community now, beyond Fair Haven, beyond New Haven's green thumbs and landscapers. He's part of the PKD community, the transplant recipient community. He wants to spread word about the transformative power of organ donation. He wants to speak out from his experience. "The whole process really opened my eyes to patient advocacy," Chris said. It's an area, he went on, where there's work to be done. "It's one of those things that I really want to help with."

Dylan Walsh is the editor of the URI newsletter and a freelance writer.

The Unusual Leadership of Ed Rodriguez

by Gina Blankenship On an early Monday autumn morning, with leaves changing colors and dropping across the city of New Haven, I found myself driving through The Hill neighborhood in the URI delivery truck, the bed full of 300-pound trees ready to be planted by the Greenskills/EMERGE planting crew. I pulled over to the side of the road to consult my map after taking a wrong turn down an unmarked street, when I received a call from another team member letting me know about a change in plans. She asked me where I was and I looked out the truck windows. At the sight of a large brick building, soccer field, and surrounding parking lot tucked in the middle of residential houses, I responded, "well, I think I'm at a school, and... Hey!—is that Ed in the parking lot? What's he doing here?"



Photo by Gina Blankenship.

Ed Rodriguez (in sunhat) working with his neighbors from the Exchange Street Greenspace group, summer 2013.

Ed does not embody the concept of leadership that many people might consider when defining a leader. He does not immediately stand out from the crowd, nor does he effortlessly bear an aura of authority, a commanding stature, or booming voice. Rather, Ed's approach seems to depart from the idea that membership, rather than leadership, is the correct mindset for community-based work. Ed demonstrates his commitment to the project through consistent participation, outreach to neighbors, an attentive attitude toward the work and people, and, most importantly, through a warm and open smile reflective of an equally warm and open personality.

Working alongside Ed this past summer in Fair Haven, it was not always obvious to me where the source of his passion comes from. While interested in concrete goals—clean up the neighborhood, plant x number of trees for shade and beauty, cultivate a sense of pride and ownership that discourages littering, loitering, and so forth—his passion goes far beyond the bounds of his own street and immediate neighborhood. Our first days together, knocking on doors at the beginning of the season revealed a potentially rough road ahead for neighbor recruitment. For our first scheduled planning meeting we had zero attendance. Ed put on a positive face: "It was definitely because of the rain," he said. "No one will come out in the rain." While

rethinking recruitment strategies, Ed said that we didn't necessarily have to restrict ourselves to Exchange Street, that we could talk to people on the next street over, or two streets over. He was willing to volunteer his time planting trees anywhere that people wanted them. The way he saw it, there were plenty of neighborhoods in the city that desired and would appreciate trees. He was convinced that once people started they would see how fun it was and become addicted, like him.

The Exchange Street group became one of the most productive Greenspace groups of 2013, in no small part because of Ed's commitment and fire for community-based environmental work. The group had no trouble keeping busy, planting across three blocks on Exchange Street. Ed's effort proved contagious. One day this summer we were planting in front of a neighbor's house several blocks from Ed's. Other core group volunteers had been unavailable to help that day, so Ed was the only non-family member helping to plant the tree. Everyone in the house came out to participate or watch. The kids filled buckets of water and the

young men and Ed dug the hole. It was a lively social affair. Conversation flowed fluidly, often switching mid-sentence between Spanish and English. Deep into digging we discovered a giant slab of concrete in the hole, still attached to the sidewalk. The high energy was slightly deflated and a struggle to break the concrete ensued. I ran to the truck to look for additional tools thinking this would be an all-hands-on-deck effort, only to return and see Ed lurching toward the truck to unload the giant slab of concrete, which he was carrying by himself. I shrieked with surprise and concern. The young men responded with reassuring cheers: "He's a Puerto Rican bull!"

It was with these memories that, sitting in the truck, I hung up the phone and ran over to say hello to Ed at the school in The Hill at 7:30 on a recent Monday morning. It took him a second to get oriented when I said hello. He seemed as surprised as I was to see a familiar face at that time and place. After a brief moment, recognition set in and he gave me a big hug. He asked what I was doing there, how I was. I pointed to

the truck loaded with trees and told him I was still at it. His tired morning eyes lit up with joy on hearing this news. I asked him what he was doing up so early halfway across town. He pointed into the car beside him. He was trying to coax a small boy out of the backseat and into school. I immediately recognized seven-year-old Jayden who, along with his mother and two younger siblings, spent several summer evenings on Exchange Street planting, weeding flower beds, and cleaning trash during our Greenspace work nights. Ed explained that he was helping Jayden's mom out because she had gotten a job as a bus driver and needed someone to get Jayden to school. So here was the Puerto Rican Bull—with people as with trees, both tender and loving, full of grace and generous spirit.

Gina Blankenship has worked with both URI Greenskills and Greenspace and was a Greenspace intern during the summer of 2013. She is a Masters student at Yale F&ES with interests including social ecology and environmental philosophy and education.

Research Roundup

Three recent graduates from the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies—Emily Jack-Scott, Max Piana, and Blake Troxel—coauthored articles on urban ecology that were published this year (bibliography below).

The first article, on stewardship success, examines the factors most strongly associated with growth and survival of urban street trees. For a number of years, research has indicated that community stewardship generally increases the survival of street trees. But until now, surprisingly little work had been done to tease out which aspects of community seem to best support this survival. Is community size important? What about the type of stewardship (block watch, church, concerned neighbors, public housing, school)? Or the number of years active and general experience level? Sorting

through these and other variables, the article concludes that trees tend to survive better in communities with longstanding stewardship groups that have both more experience and more participants.

The second article strives to create a rule of thumb between the diameter of a tree's trunk at a given age and its canopy size over time—allometric scaling, as it's known. Max and Blake surveyed almost 1,500 trees from 10 different species across New Haven and found that, across all species, an important and measurable relationship exists. How well these results can be generalized to climates different from New Haven, or to trees outside of the studied age range, is a question that remains to be answered.

Both papers provide valuable guidance to city managers at a time when tree

planting in urban centers across the country is gaining attention and investment from city hall.

URI Director Colleen Murphy-Dunning and F&ES Professor Mark Ashton contributed to both articles.

For more information, see:

- Jack-Scott, E., Piana, M., Troxel, B., Murphy-Dunning, C., Ashton, M. 2013. Stewardship Success: How Community Group Dynamics Affect Urban Street Tree Survival and Growth. *Arboriculture & Urban Forestry*. 39(4), 189-196.
- Troxel, B., Piana, M., Ashton, M., Murphy-Dunning, C. 2013. Relationships between bole and crown size for young urban trees in the northeastern USA. *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening* 12, 144-153.

One Block To Start

by
Sumana
Serchan

My truck rolls down Division Street. I take a right on Winchester Avenue and continue past “One Way” street signs. I turn left. A green sign says “Lilac St.” I drive until I reach the intersection.

On the porch of a two-story house to my right are two three-year old girls who greet me with smiles. My arrival brings with it an air of excitement that blows gently among them. I also bring four pots of variegated hostas, four of liriopes, four of blooming day lilies, four of coral bells, a half yard of compost, and half of mulch. From the point of my arrival, the girls offer to help. Their eyes monitor my every movement. I hand them a packet of chalk and encourage them to decorate the sidewalk with their creativity. Diane, their grandmother, descends from the second floor of the house and calls Latoya, the Greenspace group leader. A few seconds later, we hear footsteps. No sooner has she come down from the same house, off Latoya goes to call neighbors who had agreed to help. She recruits a small team of volunteers; Elaine, the next-door neighbor, with Maya and her cousins from across the street, all join us. Latoya reiterates the day’s work activity, first discussed during the previous weekend. The glove bag is emptied. Tools are assigned and the group marches down the block to accomplish its mission.

Lilac Street is one of many streets that make up the Newhallville neighborhood, home to the historic Farmington Canal Greenway, a former canal turned bike trail, and the old Winchester factory, which is undergoing renovation. Most recently, Newhallville has emerged as a center of several community gardens and Community Greenspaces. The Lilac Street Greenspace began last year.

The houses on both sides of Lilac Street are occupied predominantly by African Americans. On a fine Saturday midday, one can find elderly people sitting on the porches, young men and women talking, and children playing in yards and on sidewalks. However, both sides of the street are devoid of trees—the final detail needed to shelter pedestrians with majestic branches, to cast enchantment. Fall arrives on this street as it does



Photo by Sumana Serchan.

On a planting day, children along Lilac Street take a water break.

everywhere in New England, with cooler temperatures and clear mornings, but does not bring with it the fiery autumn foliage. Realizing the dearth of trees on her block and seeking an answer to the call for beautification, Latoya Agnew, the 21-year old undergraduate at Albertus Magnus, decided to lead a Greenspace group starting in 2012.

Latoya is a powerful local presence. She founded the Newhallville Rising Dream Team, a branch of New Elm City Dream that addresses issues of youth violence and unemployment in the Elm City. She takes every opportunity to mobilize her community members, whether by voter education workshops or vote-pulling operations. Latoya’s efforts to start the Lilac Street Greenspace echoed the general objectives of URI: urban environmental restoration, community building, and stewardship. She started on her own block, targeting a vacant lot owned by the city. The group’s vision was to turn the lot into a community garden. The group also decided to beautify the streets. Having planted two trees in the streetscape, along with diverse perennials, and added a circular garden of perennials to the vacant lot, the Greenspace program ended last year as summer gave way to fall. This summer saw the addition of another four volunteers, along with the planting of more perennials and shrubs. The group also undertook soil lead remediation projects for two houses and submitted

its community garden application to the New Haven Land Trust.

Greenspace leaders like Latoya often have the eyes to recognize opportunity and the determination to work together, to build and sustain relationships, in order to ensure the safety and beauty of every park, street, and yard. On Lilac Street, it started on one block. The hope is that the works of this group might ripple into adjacent blocks.

We have been working together for two hours. The plants I brought are now in the ground, well cared for with a sprinkle of water and a ring of mulch. The sidewalks look like an artist’s canvas. After we put away the tools and restore the gloves, we pause and assess our work. Maya exclaims that it was her first time planting and that she will water the plants regularly. We take respite from summer sun on the porch of Diane’s house. We treat ourselves to juicy watermelon. I bid everyone farewell and the two girls’ eyes follow me as I make a left turn on Newhall Street.

Sumana Serchan was a Greenspace intern and will graduate from Yale F&ES in December 2013. Her interests lie in environmental education and outreach, and in working with community members on urban and rural natural resources management.

Bringing Federal and Local Resources Together for Birds

by
Bailey
Johansen

You may have read recently in the *New Haven Register* or the *New Haven Independent* about the urban oasis projects in Beaver Ponds Park, Dover Beach, and West River Memorial Park. You may have read that URI is partnering with the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), Audubon Connecticut, and a suite of other local organizations to create and improve bird habitat in urban settings. And possibly you’re aware that New Haven is one of only eight project sites across the entire nation.

This summer I had the privilege of being the URI Greenspace intern assigned to West River Memorial Park. There I worked closely building the urban oasis with those who make the mission of URI so meaningful. Retired police detective Stacy Spell led the effort. Voted “Man of the Year” by the Independent in 2011, Stacy has managed the Peace Garden on Grasso Boulevard for many years. This year he expanded his commitments.

In early 2012 Audubon Connecticut assembled a coalition of partners including URI, the New Haven Department of Parks, Recreation & Trees, Common Ground High School, the Peabody Museum, and others to jointly apply for a USFWS grant. The larger agencies recognized that in order to accomplish their aims—engaging urban citizens with and educating them about wildlife—they needed to connect directly with local residents. URI’s strong New Haven ties provided a link to grassroots volunteers; URI joined the grant in order to strengthen its habitat restoration programs.

The fact that a federal agency supported this work made it quite different from other Greenspace projects. Typically, a group forms around a project and URI supports the work. In this case, URI matched local groups’ interests and capacities with grant objectives. There were struggles and concerns initially; but never were there serious doubts. The desire for success among those involved was too strong.

The Memorial Park project began with Stacy, who has long been active in other West River Greenspace sites. But because this project arose from a grant rather than organically from local residents, it did



Photo courtesy of Karen King, Director of Yale University President's Public Service Fellowship

Yale President's Public Service Fellows measure pit depth for a crabapple planted along the West River Memorial Park reflecting pool.

not have a consistent set of volunteers. In fact, the definition of “volunteer” needed to be expanded to encompass anyone from around New Haven with an affinity for wildlife or water issues. The West River Memorial Park Greenspace site, for instance, hosted two Yale Days of Service, which naturally attracted people who want to do good for others around them. (This site provides one of the few outdoor opportunities on the Day of Service, and is a great introduction to New Haven’s open spaces.)

Early in the summer the park began receiving new crabapple trees, which President’s Public Service Fellows (myself included) planted. These fellows, all Yale students, spent their summer working with city agencies and nonprofits in New Haven. It was a pleasure for me to share work about which I’m passionate while also connecting people together! All summer long I received questions from volunteers about the health of the trees that we had planted and named.

After this first effort, a much larger and more comprehensive group formed around a watershed plan for West River. This collection of people came together to air their desires and dreams for the watershed, including increased connectivity and access, improved habitat, and supplementary educational materials and opportunities. All of these goals supported the mission of URI and the objective of the USFWS

grant. For several weeks members from this coalition joined Stacy and me in planting wetland shrubs for erosion control, beautification, nesting habitat, and phragmites control. During one week, students from Common Ground High School joined, allowing youth and adults to mingle and share experiences. Common Ground students will remain involved in the project by monitoring how (or if) the number of birds on site changes between pre-and post-planting.

Despite the diversity of participants, a single vision united everyone at West River—the goals of improving natural habitats, resources, and accessibility. If community members cannot access the park, then they will not come to appreciate its beauty and purpose. And if birds cannot stop to rest and refuel along their migratory paths, then they may never reach their destination. The West River restoration is a springboard, inspiring the desire to explore more of nature and the forested connections throughout New Haven.

Bailey Johansen is a 2014 Masters of Forestry candidate who has spent her time at Yale working with URI and loving every minute of it! After graduation she plans to move to Kansas City and continue with urban and community forestry.



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Photo by Josephine Bush

Chris Ozyck and Kim Stoner take part in the Rock to Rock Earth Day Ride, less than one month after Kim donated a kidney to Chris. Paul Hammer chauffeurs.

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