



Planting day for the new caterpillar garden.

Sustaining Parks: Friends of Kensington Playground

By Charlie Edwards

Tucked away from the hustle and bustle of Chapel Street and the Saint Raphael Campus of Yale New Haven Hospital is Kensington Playground. Just two-thirds of an acre, it serves as a shady oasis in the densely settled Dwight neighborhood, which ranks last in park acreage per person in New Haven. Beneath a canopy of London plane trees are a splash pad, a butterfly garden, a caterpillar garden, and benches strewn throughout. Every Friday afternoon this summer, neighbors gathered to relax and start their weekend while the dedicated Friends of Kensington Playground continued cleaning, stewarding, and improving the park.

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From **The Director**

I am particularly impressed by the stories shared in this issue of our newsletter. I hope that, like me, you are inspired by the outstanding Greenspace volunteers from Kensington Playground, Jocelyn Square Park, and Beaver Ponds Park where their hard work and persistence have transformed once-neglected parks into the vision the community leaders set forth. Charlie Edwards describes how Kensington Playground volunteers “pour their love for the space into its soil” as they advocate for this greenspace for children. At Jocelyn Square Park, Allie Douma explains how park volunteers motivate others to care for their park by the positive example of stewardship that they set.

Longtime volunteer Nan Bartow has presented model leadership for the members of the Friends of Beaver Ponds Park for over 20 years. Along with her park friends’ co-leaders they not only diligently work in the park by weeding, planting, pruning and picking up trash on a weekly basis, but also consistently communicate with their members about the progress achieved that week, making certain to highlight every volunteer’s contribution. This Friends group leadership team consists of Nan Bartow, Joan Hilliard, James Cramer, and Rebecca Cramer, who together share the responsibility of organizing park events and fostering community. Rebecca Cramer writes a weekly profile of their park volunteers and has shared her profile of Nan which we’ve reprinted in this newsletter with Rebecca’s permission.

Like Nan, URI’s Chris Ozyck and Anna Pickett both have remarkable records of service to caring for New Haven. Chris is celebrating his 25th anniversary and Anna her 15th at URI. I am very grateful to both for their incredible dedication to our mission and to their tireless efforts to champion this work. Operating as a small staff team is similar to working as a group of Greenspace volunteers. We share the challenges, as well as the results of our efforts.

Greenspace groups reflect the old proverb *Many Hands Make Light Work*, sharing the tasks as teams. New Haven Parks Director Max Webster takes that adage one step further with his *All Hands* vision to cooperatively improve New Haven’s parks. Please see page 11 to learn about the *All Hands* strategic planning process. I hope that you will weigh in with your views.



Colleen Murphy-Dunning

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Volunteer Spotlight: Nan Bartow

By Rebecca Cramer



The Friends of Beaver Ponds Park (FoBPP), located between Beaver Hills and Newhallville, sends out a weekly newsletter highlighting the accomplishments of our previous week's work and inviting volunteers to join us the following week. Longtime FoBPP organizer and URI board member Nan Bartow writes the reports, and for the past several years we have highlighted volunteers through the Volunteer Spotlight column. This summer, we finally took on the daunting task of trying to summarize all that Nan does for the park and our group, and we are pleased to share it with the broader URI community.

When I asked Nan about how her journey at Beaver Ponds Park began, she replied that our current incarnation of FoBPP formed in 2002 when she received an alarmed telephone call from a local resident that the north and south ponds were being slowly drained and the area would soon become a dangerous swamp unless the draining was halted. She and a small group

revived FoBPP, which had previously organized a park cleanup. Managing to bring the level of the water back to normal, they started beautifying the park. They also obtained grants from the Community Foundation of Greater New Haven and URI as well as a URI intern to help them. Beginning small, they created one clearing whereby visitors would be able to see the water. Nan said that, in these early days of FoBPP, they didn't know about the importance of removing invasive species and planting native perennials. Chris Ozyck, Colleen Murphy-Dunning, our successive URI interns, and faculty from the Yale School of the Environment were extremely important mentors and educators for the group.

Nan's favorite activity in the park is to restore natural areas by cutting out vines and other invasive vegetation and replacing them with native plants. She also enjoys the bonds our community has developed working together in the park. While we face some challenges as we deal with plant theft and sustaining our group, Nan values our enthusiasm and strong partnerships with URI, NH Parks, US Fish and Wildlife, Audubon CT, and the Garden Club of New Haven. As we work toward achieving our goals, she is always thinking about more questions, such as how to maintain our new natural play area and how to get water service in the park.

Nan remains committed to highlighting everyone's contributions in our weekly reports, fondly remembering Colleen's advice on the importance of recognition. We, in turn, recognize and are profoundly grateful for the many ways Nan brings our group together and makes our work in Beaver Ponds Park possible.

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By Charlie Edwards



Children joining volunteers to spread mulch on the flower beds!



But this wasn't always the case. In 2019 the City of New Haven began the process of selling the park to real estate developers. The Board of Alders voted in 2020 to sell the park for \$1 to developers who would build 15 housing units on the lot. In response, concerned community members organized as the Friends of Kensington Playground, formally becoming a 501c3. The group did everything they could to spread awareness in the neighborhood, but in the depths of the Covid-19 pandemic they were limited to door knocking and meeting on Zoom. The group filed a lawsuit in November of 2020 to protect the park from development. In the midst of the legal dispute, the Friends of Kensington Playground continued to bring the community in and care for the park by hosting events for Easter, sharing bikes with children in the community, and holding a pumpkin festival. Given the lawsuit and community opposition, the developer withdrew the housing development plans in 2023, and the park was saved. Jane Comins, a member of the Friends of Kensington Playground, said of the effort, "We were all exhausted," but they felt strengthened because "There was a whole community behind us." While saving the park from development was a key milestone, there was still plenty of work to be done to improve it.

Last year, the Friends of Kensington Playground worked as a URI Greenspace group to plant five trees and a brand-new butterfly garden, which was combined with a sidewalk mural. This summer, the group returned with the same enthusiasm and passion to continue working to steward and improve their neighborhood's park. Each Friday afternoon, the group, made up of core members of the Friends of Kensington Playground, volunteers from Fellowship Place, and local residents and youth, came to the shade of Kensington Playground to

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— JANE COMINS, *member of the Friends of Kensington Playground*

pour their love for the space into its soil. Our work began slowly, but for good reason; the Parks Department had started the process of installing several improvements in the park. They redid the sidewalks and added a new walkway to connect with the splash pad. Initially the group's work centered on caring for last year's planting by weeding the garden beds, picking up trash, and watering the young trees. In the latter half of the summer, our work was dedicated to creating a brand-new caterpillar garden to complement the butterfly garden from last year. The design was modeled after “The Very Hungry Caterpillar,” by Eric Carle, to make it recognizable and exciting to the children who use the park. We made each segment of the caterpillar's body out of bunches of pollinator-friendly flowers to bring both beauty and biodiversity into the park.

While we planted the new flowers, residents regularly stopped by to say their thanks to the group and ask about the new additions. While they did not always join the work, the love the neighborhood has for this park is undeniable. Some days, children playing in the park would come by to help out, making the caterpillar

garden a space for beauty and for learning. Once the plants were added, we lined the border of the garden with bricks and placed a large stone as the caterpillar's head. When we left work for the summer, the plan was to finish the garden by painting new sidewalk murals for both the butterfly and caterpillar gardens as a community event for everyone to join.

Later this October, the Parks Department will be installing a new playground and swing sets to the park! For the Friends of Kensington Playground and the residents who use the park day-to-day, this is a monumental moment. It marks a tangible shift in the city's support for the park by investing resources into its improvement. The now-hopeful future of this park is a testament to the impact of dedicated community organizing and neighborhood representation. In addition to receiving a new playscape, the Friends of Kensington Playground will be hosting their 5th Annual Pumpkin Festival this October. Kensington Playground demonstrates the importance of green spaces to their communities and the reciprocal relationship of the community care needed to sustain parks. 🌱



Adding finishing touches to the new caterpillar garden.

Encouraging Others to Care at Jocelyn Square Park

By Allie Douma



Friends of Jocelyn Square Park standing beside their newly planted swamp white oak.

It all began with trash. In 2020, while walking his dog every morning in Jocelyn Square Park, Kev Darnell began to pick up trash around the park. As this practice of his grew bigger, he kept track of all the bags he picked up, and eventually, in 2022, teamed up with URI to create the Friends of Jocelyn Square Park. The group began as a way for Kev to continue his hobby of collecting garbage but grew into a bright community that has helped transform a community park.

Jocelyn Square Park has some unique challenges compared to other parks in New Haven, as it lies between I-91 and the railroad lines, hindering people's access. Furthermore, it is located in a neighborhood with limited park access, making it an important community hub for the area. On any given day you can see children playing in the playground, a band performing, or friends enjoying a nice picnic. While this park has always been vital to the community, the work of the Friends of Jocelyn Square Park has

undoubtedly enhanced the beauty of the space and increased foot traffic. As Kev highlighted, much of the impact is not about the actual work. Seeing people care for the park encourages others to care for their space and pick up after themselves.

Now every Thursday evening from June to the beginning of August you can find a group of dedicated friends at Jocelyn Square Park. These friends come from all over the city to pick up trash, plant trees, water, and take a break from their other daily activities. As Kev said, “We have so many difficult conversations all day and [volunteering] is a real opportunity to have really positive interactions outside of work and with strangers.” It is a place to release, to focus on the present, and to be with friends and community members. The group understands that the park belongs to everyone; they steward the space not to have ownership over how it looks and feels but because they believe that everyone has a responsibility to help take care of their environment and community.

This past summer was the group’s third together, during which they planted five trees, hoping that their work will create long-lasting change. They also wanted to help increase the tree cover in an area of the city with sparse tree canopy. Always in good spirits no matter the heat, they worked together to plant a tulip tree, a burr oak, a white oak, a buckeye, and a swamp white oak, adding some variation to the park’s trees. Now this group will continue to water the trees for three years, sustaining their effort to care for and take responsibility for their space.

This is not the first iteration of the Friends of Jocelyn Square Park. In the ‘90s, New Haven community activist Theresa Carr began the group with some of her community members and friends. Theresa was known to be a woman of action; rather than complaining about the city’s inaction to take care of things, she would find a way to do it herself. Now her memorial lies in the park bearing the phrase “Keep doing our work,” which she said to a friend just two days before she died in 2014. These words ring true for the new version of the Friends of Jocelyn Square Park, as they are continuing to follow in her footsteps, asking what they can do to help and moving forward to improve their community.

“We have so many difficult conversations all day and [volunteering] is a real **opportunity to have really positive interactions outside of work and with strangers.**”

— KEV DARNELL, *URI volunteer*



Chris Ozyck surrounded by 2010 interns including Anna Pickett on far right.

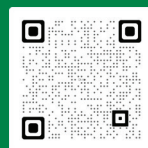
Celebrating URI Staff Anniversaries!

Celebrating his 25th year, URI Associate Director Chris Ozyck continues to lead the Community Greenspace program, champion “De-Vining” across New Haven, train interns, guide technical field work and more. Dr. Erika Svendsen interviewed Chris to learn about his quarter-of-a-century service to support building communities of trust in New Haven and creating a greener future. Scan the QR code at right to read her fascinating interview with Chris “*You’ve Got Lightning in a Bottle*.” Anna Pickett is also celebrating a major anniversary with her 15th year at URI. Starting as a Community Greenspace

intern in 2010 (pictured at right along with Chris in center), Anna continued as staff leading URI’s community outreach and development efforts. Among her many responsibilities and accomplishments, Anna created and leads the Tree Ambassador outreach efforts, has co-lead Rock-to-Rock for 15 years, spearheaded outreach for the re-envisioning parks initiative and supports works across all of URI’s programs. Together Anna and Chris are the living embodiment of the URI mission – year after year, consistently showing up to support community-envisioned projects and stewardship.



Chris and Anna happy to be back in the office in 2017 after their successful kidney transplant surgeries!

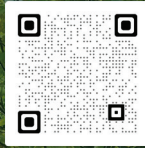


uri.yale.edu/lightning-bottle

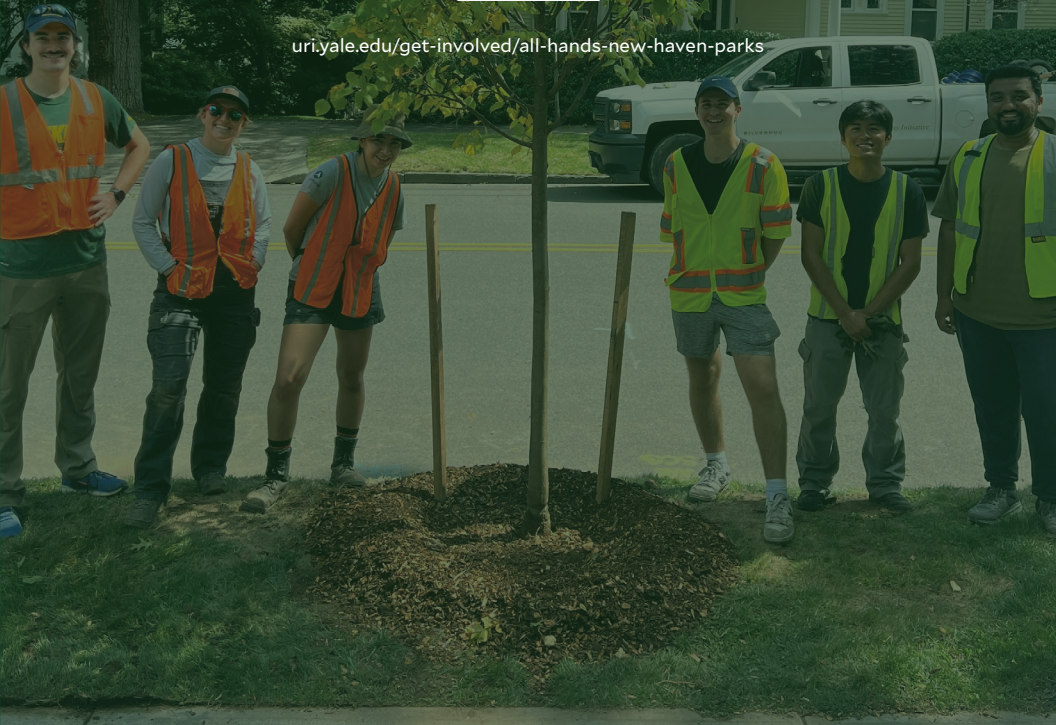
Get involved!

URI is gathering public input to inform
the City of New Haven's
"All Hands for New Haven Parks Strategic Plan."

**Scan the code to learn more
and participate!**



uri.yale.edu/get-involved/all-hands-new-haven-parks



URI empowers and supports communities in the restoration, stewardship
and enjoyment of the urban forest and nature in New Haven.



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GreenSkills interns planting trees at John S. Martinez School.