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



GREENSKILLS TURNS TEN

by Matt Viens

Trees planted: 1,381. Student participants: 198. No matter which number you use, the Urban Resources Initiative's GreenSkills high school program has displayed an impressive reach since its establishment. This year, however, the program will attain what may be its most important number to date: 10. Started in 2007 in response to a growing backlog of New Haven street-tree requests and in acknowledgment that URI's existing programming was failing to consistently involve teenage youth, GreenSkills will celebrate its ten-year anniversary this fall.

Numbers, of course, don't tell the full story. In reaching these

numbers, GreenSkills has undergone a variety of transformations in order to improve both its scope and its impact. At the core of this tale behind the numbers are the program's goals of engaging youth in meaningful, paid work experience and providing clinical learning opportunities for Yale students. While the goals themselves have remained unchanged, URI has explored a number of ways to deliver on these goals in an ongoing effort to adapt to the needs and interests of program participants.

In its earliest pilot form, the GreenSkills program enlisted students from Common Ground High School and youth with

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As we launch our tenth year of URI's GreenSkills program, co-managers Katie Beechem and Matthew Viens have each contributed articles reflecting on the growth of the program as well as of individual participants. We've been fortunate to have had incredible people committed to making the program a success, including stellar interns, board members and staff. Katie and Matt are the newest members of the URI staff. We managed our

initial years piloting the GreenSkills program with the help of Yale interns, and as we ramped up, Margaret Carmalt led our green job efforts from 2010–2015. Katie and Matt followed in her footsteps, after stints as URI interns for both our Community Greenspace and GreenSkills programs during their years in graduate school at the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies.

Committed staff are crucial to reaching our mission, and I am immensely proud of ours. As Matt describes in his article, we are constantly striving to improve our work in the field and with our team. Awareness that our work as a staff of five will make a difference in the lives of individuals, as Katie notes in her article about Jamal, as well as in the communities where we plant, results in a tightly knit and dedicated staff. Like Matt and Katie, in 2010 Anna Pickett also joined the URI staff after interning in the Community Greenspace program. She has since become the glue of URI, seamlessly conducting outreach for both Greenspace and GreenSkills and leading development efforts like Rock-to-Rock. Another invaluable member of the staff, Associate Director Chris Ozyck, first began working with URI in 1993 as a volunteer planting with Greenspace groups, soon became a board member in 1995, and then joined the staff in 2000. He is truly irreplaceable—a font of field knowledge, expertise and energy.



GreenSkills crew member Herman Gray joins Katie and Matt (back row), Chris, Anna and Colleen.

As in any small organization, everyone must be willing to pitch in on any task: delivering trees, buying snacks for crews, taking trucks in for seemingly endless repairs. It is the willingness to help on both the big and the small that has forged bonds amongst our team. Sharing the work load as well as the personal has extended our connections beyond colleagues to friendship. When Chris's young daughters visited the office during his early years on the staff, they had their own desk complete with drawings and art supplies. Now when snow days cancel school, his daughters often babysit Anna's young sons. We all celebrated as Matt revealed his recent news of engagement to his fiancée, Brooke, and as Katie enjoyed her "CrossFit" triumphs. Naturally, she is our staffer on the 100-kilometer Rock-to-Rock ride.

While sharing celebrations with each other is effortless, being able to support one another during the challenges in life is more complex. Recently Chris and Anna called our team together to discuss the ongoing kidney disease Chris faces. In 2013 entomologist Dr. Kim Stoner donated a kidney to Chris, but over time that kidney failed due to a virus complication. Without another kidney transplant he will need to rely on dialysis. Most people on the donor list wait five years or more for a cadaver kidney unless a live donor steps forward. Unlike people with blood type AB, who can be recipients of any other blood types, Chris has O-negative blood and he can only receive a kidney from a donor with blood type O. Fortunately, not only does Anna have blood type O, she also is the type of person who would be willing to make the sacrifice to donate her kidney. I'm in awe of their courage. While there is always uncertainty in what lies ahead, I am absolutely sure that our team can count on each other through both the best and hardest days to come.

Colleen Murphy-Dunning

Greenskills Turns Ten

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learning disabilities from Milford, Conn., in the planting and monitoring of street trees. Following several seasons under this framework, the model was expanded from a pilot to a full program, at which point the decision was made to work with a second local institution, the Sound School, in place of URI's Milford partner. The reason for this shift was twofold: the Sound School's mission and programming, which focus heavily on environmental and marine science, align closely with URI's objectives and professional opportunities. Furthermore, by partnering with a New Haven institution, the GreenSkills program was able to involve a greater number of local youth in the greening of their own streets and neighborhoods.

Since those early changes to the GreenSkills model, much emphasis has been placed on deepening and expanding student learning opportunities. URI now offers senior intern positions to students who are returning to the program, allowing them to take on greater responsibility and gain experience in leadership roles. Through URI's Community Greenspace program, students can also apply for multi-week summer internships that feature unique projects in open-space restoration, stewardship, and community building. Additionally, URI is now exploring the possibility of offering "apprenticeship" positions to more formally engage with alumni of the GreenSkills program, recognizing that openings for urban environmental work are limited following high school graduation. These positions would build upon URI's current experience working with three recent high school graduates and GreenSkills alumni, all of whom have expressed an enduring interest in urban environmental



Students advocating for green jobs during the first year of the GreenSkills program.

and community forestry work. The ultimate goal of this apprenticeship program will be to bridge the gap between high school environmental curricula and continued education or permanent employment opportunities. In this way it helps ensure that learning and professional development occur long after involvement in the GreenSkills program, not just during the tree-planting season.

Expansion of learning opportunities has not been limited to high school participants alone. The roles of, and positions available to, Yale interns have undergone significant changes since the program's launch a decade ago. For example, interns who have multiple seasons of GreenSkills experience and would like to take on a larger management role can apply for a "field coordinator" position. Individuals in this position are responsible for overseeing the logistics of

the high school program, which includes communicating with school partners, directing the Yale intern team, and providing in-field support on planting days. Furthermore, Yale students can participate in expanded urban forestry work in support of the GreenSkills program, such as updating the New Haven street-tree inventory and pruning young trees planted by URI. These projects provide a deeper understanding of the full range of urban-forestry operations, and enable Yale students to develop and strengthen specific technical skill sets. This in turn deepens the experience of high school participants, whose learning is enriched as the expertise of their supervisors expands.

These evolutions are critical in that they help maintain the dynamic and unique nature of the GreenSkills program. Since its beginning, GreenSkills has been managed as a living program, enabling

it to meet high school and Yale interns where they are—both literally and figuratively. For example, students have an opportunity to learn while enacting positive change in their communities and around their schools, those locations where they physically are. Furthermore, the multifaceted nature of GreenSkills allows students to pursue as many opportunities as they are interested in, ensuring that learning and professional development occur at the best pace and direction for each individual. In this way, the program goes beyond traditional environmental education, tying student experience and capacity in with community improvement and place-based learning. Student interns not only learn about urban nature, trees and forestry at a self-controlled pace; they are able to apply these same principles within their own communities, strengthening both understanding and connection to place.

Thus, while 1,381 and 198 are indeed impressive numbers, their ability to fully capture and describe the GreenSkills high school program is inadequate. Planting thousands of trees and engaging hundreds of students are impressive and useful performance metrics, but the true strength of the program lies far beyond summary statistics. It is the ability to see the ones within the hundreds and thousands—to provide individualized and specialized support in the recognition that no two students and no two experiences are alike. This approach, combined with the drive to constantly improve, has carried the GreenSkills high school program through its first ten years of existence, and will continue to guide the program in its next ten years.

How Things Grow: *GreenSkills Crew Member Jamal Watts Works Hard for Change*

by Katie Beechem

A pair of weatherproof pants and tan boots emerges from the knee-length rain jacket draped over Jamal's slender frame. It is 8:00 a.m. and it has already started to rain. As the crew sluggishly assembles to discuss the day's planting schedule, Jamal has a bounce to his step. He opens and closes his fists as if he's grasping for tools from the air, then rubs his hands together. We talk about our plan for the morning: two men on each planting hole to start, two men unloading trees from the truck. Jamal wastes no time getting started. He swings his arms at his side as he marches to the truck, drops of rain beading up on his jacket. He says mightily under his breath, "Let's go."

Born into a large family, Jamal was raised with two sisters and three brothers. He grew up in Hartford, spending a couple of years with family in South Carolina. His parents instilled the value of hard work, and his father encouraged him to read books and keep up with the news. Jamal was smart and enjoyed working with his hands. As a kid, he spent summers in the tobacco fields in Windsor to make money for school clothes.

But Jamal had a rebellious streak. After tenth grade, at the age of 15, Jamal dropped out of school. On the streets of Hartford—a landscape where the social hierarchy for young black men revolves around toughness—Jamal did not want to be known as smart. Following his father and his brothers, Jamal sold drugs to make money. He became a user and an addict. He was angry, and though he would not have admitted it at the time, he was scared. People were getting killed all around him. Jamal recalls the sentiment of the time, "It was us against the world." Like many young men, Jamal and his



Jamal removes a piece of an old tree stump from a planting hole.

brothers were eventually arrested and sentenced to time in prison.

In describing the effects of detention on prisoners, Jamal says, "You either come out better than you went in, or you come out worse." Jamal knew that his life had been moving in the wrong direction. Furthermore, his family had abandoned the drug trade and wanted him to do the same, and Jamal's continued criminal activity was putting a strain on their relationship. After his release, Jamal entered a drug rehabilitation program in New Haven.

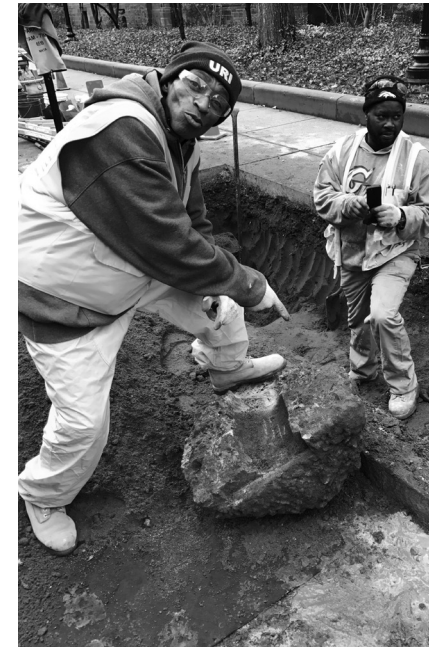
Today, Jamal has been clean for three years, with many lessons gained along the way. When he entered rehabilitation, one of the first things he learned was to take full responsibility for his decisions. He had to "stop pointing fingers" and put his trust in people who were trying to help. Another challenge Jamal faced in his recovery was dealing with the void that remained once his days no longer revolved around a reckless lifestyle. As Jamal puts it now, "You can't eat steak

all the time." He had to learn to accept difficult situations and uncomfortable emotions without trying to fix them with drugs—to "take life on life's terms" and simply accept that "Sometimes you have a bad day."

Jamal also had to find other ways to bring purpose to his life. For this, he drew on his deep passion for helping others, with his brothers and father as his inspiration. Though they had not always been role models, their ability to change their behavior and live successful and meaningful lives gave Jamal the hope that "Anything is possible." Jamal is strongly influenced by his father, who now works for Open Hearth, a temporary residential community serving homeless men in Greater Hartford.

Jamal's involvement with URI's GreenSkills team and EMERGE Connecticut has provided an important outlet for his desire to help other people and give back to society. He views his work planting trees as a way to have a positive impact on the lives of local residents while leaving a "living legacy" that his grandkids can enjoy. The programs at EMERGE have also helped him understand the importance of opening up about his experiences, fears, and feelings: "If I keep it in the dark, it's going to fester. . . . It can't survive in the light." Facing his fears, his emotions, and his destructive habits has been a gradual process for Jamal, and he still works hard every day to make the right decisions. But through his commitment to helping others, his positive and supportive relationships, and his uncompromising work ethic, Jamal is succeeding.

The GreenSkills program supports those



Jamal works on a bioswale construction project in downtown New Haven.

who have made a decision to move forward by providing a structured and safe environment to learn, contribute, and grow. But it is a piece of the puzzle, a part of the solution. For Jamal and other crew members, work does not end when the last tree is planted. There is a constant fight to defy social pressures, cultural biases, or their own internal demons.

During our lunch break, the team gathers under a tent as the rain bears down and fills our planting holes with mud. Jamal finishes his sandwich, grabs his tools, and gets back to work without a complaint. He is right: "Sometimes you have a bad day." But like the trees that he plants, Jamal keeps growing toward the light.