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Yale SCHOOL OF THE ENVIRONMENT

*The Forest School*



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# URBAN ISSUES

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



Photo credit: Hanwen Zhang

Quarry Park volunteers, all park neighbors or local Fair Haven Heights residents, share jokes after a long day of work. Left to right: Alice, Marty, Tracy, and Jean.

## JURASSIC PARK

by Hanwen Zhang

Sometime before the burning bush, before the bittersweet, stands of strapping young beech trees had stood in this six-acre Fair Haven Heights park, and before that, two yawning quarry pits, and, before even that, the eroded Paleozoic rock sediment that squeezed and stretched like putty as the plates of the earth slowly, tectonically groaned away. And before that, dinosaurs.

"Yeah," Tracy Blanford nods. "Dinosaurs." Here, as she tells me Quarry Park's story, she likes to pause and look around, almost as if expecting to find raptor footprints freshly stamped in the ground.

Thirty-five years of living beside this park have given Tracy a sense of its curiously messy past.

During the 1600s—and for the better part of three centuries—it had been the site of two family-run quarrying operations that supplied the brownstone to fortify the houses and walls of Yale College. Sometime after dinosaur fossils were discovered there, it became a dumping ground for oyster shells and old shoes, and then for mattresses and beer bottles.

In the middle of it all, though, there had once been paths wide enough to walk along. Tracy's children's bus stop was just on the other side of the park, which meant daily dog walks leading them past upturned boulders and through swaths of forest. "My kids would always want to come over here," she said, noting that digging in the forest was one of their fondest activities.

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## FROM THE DIRECTOR



Promoting people's involvement is key to accomplishing our mission: to empower and support communities in the restoration, stewardship, and enjoyment of the urban forest and nature in New Haven. Yale undergraduate student Hanwen Zhang's newsletter articles about the reopening of the Trowbridge Environmental Center and of Tracy Blanford's leadership of the restoration and stewardship of Quarry Park showcase two examples of how we strive to meet our purpose. We are

fortunate to engage many other admirable volunteers who carry out countless civic efforts to benefit the city.

Former Friends of East Rock Park volunteer leader Mayor Justin Elicker is an exceptional example. His early work in grassroots environmental efforts is evident still with his recent assistance to make community-led reopenings of park nature centers possible. Another stellar model is Community Greenspace volunteer Leslie Radcliffe, who not only organizes her neighbors to help care for the Truman Street greenspace but also serves on the URI board and as a City Plan Commissioner. Alders Honda Smith, Sarah Miller, and Evelyn Rodriguez (and former URI board member) all continue to champion Greenspace projects in their wards even after being elected. These leaders invest time and energy stewarding both our environment and our community.

Following the recent deaths of two incredibly kind and inspirational URI board members, this newsletter is dedicated to the memory of Donald Williams and Semi Semi-Dikoko. Before joining the board in 2016, Donald Williams was, first, a central force on the GreenSkills tree-planting team as URI was forming our partnership with EMERGE in 2010. Don brought critical understanding to the board, which helped to guide our work with EMERGE. Like Don, Semi Semi-Dikoko first became involved with URI through his volunteer planting prior to joining the URI board in 2012. As the former president of Friends of Edgewood Park, Semi sparkled with enthusiasm and ideas to hone the Community Greenspace program to better meet the community's needs. Don and Semi's contributions will have a lasting impact on our programs. We will all fondly remember their contagious smiles and steadfast commitment to New Haven's environment.

Colleen Murphy-Dunning

## A Q&A with New GreenSkills Manager Miche Palmer

by Sara Santiago '19 MF

We are happy to welcome Miche Palmer back to URI! Miche joins URI as the GreenSkills Manager, coordinating tree planting and training students in urban forestry. Miche graduated with a Master of Environmental Management degree from the Yale School of the Environment in 2017. As a student, they were a URI Community Greenspace intern and their studies focused on urban forestry, climate change, and equity. Miche worked previously as an urban forester in San Francisco and for the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation, where they were responsible for street-tree planting. In their own words, Miche shares their excitement and vision as the new GreenSkills Manager.

**Since working with URI as a master's student, what drew you back to the organization?**

The community aspect of URI brought me back. URI leads with community within our programs and our approach to urban forestry. A perfect example is that most trees planted here are watered and cared for by community members. There is buy-in from residents and great partnerships and relationships.

**Is there a project or element of your work that you are really excited about as the GreenSkills Manager?**

I am excited about engaging with our partner organization EMERGE, which is a crew of folks with incarceration in their past, whom we link with students at the Yale School of the Environment and Yale College. I love the bridge between communities who might not otherwise be engaged—and trees provide that link.

I am also looking forward to expanding partnerships with folks in New Haven that URI hasn't had the opportunity to collaborate with yet. I am also eager to connect with students and professors at Yale who are researching ur-



Photo credit: Sara Santiago.

**Miche Palmer returns to URI as the GreenSkills Manager, bringing a vision for street tree equity with them.**

ban forestry, so that we can use the most current data and tools in URI's programming.

**Since completing your master's and gaining further experience, what lessons or skills are you bringing back to URI?**

I bring a greater understanding of how to ensure that our young trees are surviving—whether in choosing species or by planting techniques—and I am hoping to pass that onto the folks I will be training.

I am thrilled to bring in the knowledge for choosing species for climate adaptation, which I was working on in NYC. At URI, I will seek to make the link between climate change, the urban canopy, and public health—we need shade for all neighborhoods in New Haven. I am looking forward to making partnerships in public health, too, to make sure we are planting and maintaining trees for public health benefits.

**Can you share a dream you have for the greenspaces and communities you will work with in New Haven?**

My big dream is tree equity. I would like New Haven to continue to be a leader in tree equity and for everyone in New Haven to be able to enjoy the benefits of trees.



# Jurassic Park

by Hanwen Zhang (continued from page 1)

Today, those trails are mostly buried under years of leaf litter and shards of broken glass. Neighbors along the park's Summit Street entrance have regrettably knocked down trees on park property and bulldozed their way into the site over the past few decades. The beech trees—unspared from the onslaught of beech leaf disease—are still standing, though somewhat scarecrow-like. Walk deep enough into the forest, and you'll stumble across a row of unfinished concrete house foundations, maybe the remains of a windshield. A few brownstone boulders are on guard by the entrance, reminders of a former, if distant, life.

The Quarry Park Greenspace group, newly formed with the help of URI this year, has since been on a quest to reclaim a bit of magic. "Your neighborhood is your responsibility, and taking care of it is just what you should do. I think a nature trail is what this space is really calling for," Tracy says. "We have to open up the park so it looks inviting and it feels safe," adds a neighbor.

During this past summer, that's meant clearing way for trails and cleaning up the Russell Street entrance. Every Thursday afternoon, I worked with this small group of dedicated Fair Haven Heights residents—former biologists, firefighters, nurses—to collect bottles of seltzer and Miller Lite left by the wayside. We yanked away the poison ivy that had smothered the entrance and plucked burning bush from the ground. We spread wood chips over the trails and welcomed foamflowers to the park entrance, sharing pizza recommendations and jokes in the process.

I never expected to fall in love with a

place as quickly as I did. To step into it isn't so much to enter an underfunded city park as it is to set foot into a new world—the forest wraps around you, almost like an old friend. Outside, the mid-afternoon sun blazes and blisters New Haven's asphalt streets; inside, the trees seem to whisper.

The neighborhood has started taking notice. Cars often slow down to ask about the project, and a few even offer to help. One local resident remarked, "It's nice to see someone doing something other than dumping!"

The work has not been without its challenges, though. Tracy and her group face a set of difficulties almost as rocky as the park's unforgiving Northeastern soil. Mattresses continue to turn up in the park on a near-weekly basis. The encroaching neighbors haven't stopped either, for that matter. "I've talked to city officials, sent pictures, the whole nine yards," says Tracy, who after first notifying the New Haven Department of Parks & Trees of Quarry Park's condition over 20 years ago is still awaiting, and now creating, change.

During the last few weeks of the summer, heavy rainwater carved a trench through our wood-chip trail, washing away our hard work. Tracy also texted me about two inkberry bushes stolen overnight. "Sometimes it can feel like a futile effort," she sighs. "Maybe it is, maybe it's not."

But this Greenspace leader who dreams of dinosaurs is no stranger to patience. Tracy's stayed around to see the forest's succession—birch trees in the park that have come and gone, giving way to beech and oaks. She has trekked through the park enough times to remember it like the back of her hand. Change,



Photo credit: Hanwen Zhang

Volunteers planting a native Witchhazel shrub at Quarry Park.

when it happens, comes incrementally, imperceptibly—a Budweiser can here, another mattress there, one single flaky burning-bush trunk at a time. No matter the setback, the group worked tirelessly all summer to bring back the place they love to fulfill the community's vision for a vibrant greenspace.

"The URI partnership has been great," declares Tracy. The Greenspace group will work throughout the winter to clear invasives and hopes to continue working on the trails next summer. "Maybe we could even make a sign or a map."

During the last work session, we admired our work together. The rows of bee balm, penstemon, and white wood asters had

brightened up the bullet-pocked park sign—the first of many future steps the group plans to take. "I want to see people use the park. It's about connecting people to this space in a positive way." She paused, then looked around at the gently swaying beeches. "I just want more people interested in the park, more people asking questions. Maybe a little bit less trash being thrown."

She took a step back, gazed at the park, and smiled.

# Trowbridge Environmental Center, Open for All

by Hanwen Zhang



Photo credit: Hanwen Zhang

**The Trowbridge Environmental Center at East Rock Park opens to provide community members with daily activities and programming. Mayor Justin Elicker '10 MEM/MBA speaks to the New Haven community inside the Trowbridge Environmental Center and celebrates the collaborative activation of the Ranger Station.**

Community members and leaders alike came together on November 5 to celebrate the re-opening of the Trowbridge Environmental Center at East Rock Park. It had been closed for years due to Parks department budget cuts and reopened its doors with big plans in mind. With fresh floors and repainted walls, the building will host community events and recreation programs daily. The activities include an outdoor program called Exploring Nature led by URI, Fair Haven Community Health Care, and Friends of East Rock Park and music lessons by the Monk Youth Jazz and STEAM Collective.

Saturday morning offered a preview of what this space will become. The room thrummed with improvisational riffs from Monk Youth Jazz as residents sipped cider, chatted, and explored the space alongside children.

Zemartas Budrys, a New Haven resident, had wandered in during a walk with his family. He and his daughter were exploring the bookshelves, where they flipped through an Audubon field book about birds.

Budrys admitted that they “often come to the [East Rock] playground” but find that “usually this place is closed.” He was pleased that the center would be open for daily use.

“I think it could be a great programming space, which has been closed for many years,” said Eric March, another local resident. He brought his two sons to the event after noticing the signs outside the park entrance and looks forward to connecting with nature.

The Trowbridge Environmental Center features an airy performance space, a hallway outfitted with display cases, and a small classroom. Here, community members can access field guide anthologies and fishing poles for outdoor activities. The space will provide services and activities for the community even on off-hours. Programming is entirely volunteer-run and low cost, explained Amanda DeCew, volunteer for Exploring Nature and nurse at Fair Haven Community Health Care.

“I’m hoping that we can really draw folks [...] who maybe haven’t always felt welcome in the park [...] because all New Haveners should

experience the health benefits of nature,” DeCew added.

“I expect that we will be very pleasantly surprised at what emerges simply by creating this opportunity for people to gather,” said David Shimchick, the Friends of East Rock Park leader. While city engineers worked on flooring and repainting, the volunteer group cleaned out closets, threw out old equipment, and reorganized the space. The Friends of East Rock Park will host open houses the first Saturday of each month. Fair Haven Community Health Care volunteers and URI will promote mental and physical health and a deeper appreciation for nature through the Junior Explorers Club and other nature-based programming.

During the open house, nonprofit leaders spoke about their programming and reflected on the work. Anna Pickett, development and outreach manager for URI, expressed enthusiasm partnering with Fair Haven Community Health Care and the Friends of East Rock Park, saying, “While East Rock Park is in the East Rock neighborhood, it is a regional park that attracts people from all over New Haven. It is also the closest big park to Fair Haven, so we are happy to collaborate together to make this investment in the city.”

Marcella Monk Flake, leader of the Monk Youth Jazz and STEAM Collective, celebrated the importance of “[cultivating] an environment where people from various walks of life feel connected.”

Mayor Justin Elicker was in attendance for the event, praising the community for its efforts in bringing a diversity of people and interests together. He recognized URI for first approaching city hall last winter with the idea of revitalizing park buildings. By August, the government rolled out a citywide initiative providing free spaces to nonprofits in exchange for community programming.

The Trowbridge Environmental Center is one of eight sites around the city currently being revitalized as community spaces. Other buildings, such as the Barnard Nature Center at West River Memorial Park and the Coogan Pavilion at Edgewood Park, were slated to reopen in late November.

“Once you open the doors, that’s when you can start to find out [...] what people want, what people need, [and] what they’re eager to do,” Shimchick said.

Exploring Nature will hold the Junior Explorers Club on Tuesdays and rotating nature-based programming and service activities on Thursdays from 3-5 pm, and Saturdays from 10-12 pm. Monk Youth Jazz has plans to meet at the Trowbridge Environmental Center on every Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday. The Exploring Nature calendar can be found at: [tinyurl.com/exploringnatureERP](http://tinyurl.com/exploringnatureERP).

The Trowbridge Environmental Center is located at the intersection of Orange and Cold Spring Streets.



Photo credit: Hanwen Zhang

**Display cases in the Trowbridge Environmental Center share the rich history of East Rock Park with community members.**