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Yale SCHOOL OF FORESTRY &
ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES



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NEWSLETTER OF THE URBAN RESOURCES INITIATIVE AT THE
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Healing Garden Volunteer Group

HEALING MEMORIAL GARDEN

by Melinda Tuhus

Before the first brick is laid, before the iconic sculpture is unveiled, the site of the Healing Memorial Garden already exudes a peacefulness that's hard to come by on the sometimes mean streets of New Haven. Trees partially surround a field set back from Valley Street in the West Rock neighborhood, and the West River burbles along the edge.

Marlene Pratt has been the moving force behind the project. She grew up in New Haven and became a teacher, but when she saw gun violence spike in the 1990s, she moved to rural North Carolina with her family to escape it, or so she thought. After her son, Gary Kyshon Miller, graduated from high school, he moved back

to New Haven to work, and was shot in a beef in his old neighborhood. He was 20 years old and left two children behind.

Being so far away was excruciating. Marlene says she prayed, "and then I got the call from the doctor that they lost him."

She said she never expected to return to New Haven, but was offered a teaching job at Career High School and decided to accept it. One day on her way home to Newhallville she saw police tape indicating another killing had taken place. "It just tore me up: this was the status quo. So I went home, went straight to the *New Haven Register* archives online looking for my son, and he was not there.

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As I've written in the past, URI is fortunate to be both a part of the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies (F&ES) as well as a separate nonprofit, which uniquely positions our organization to serve as a remarkable bridge. This URI bridge promotes a symbiotic relationship creating essential learning opportunities for Yale F&ES graduate students, who gain technical field skills through urban forestry

and park-improvement projects that address priorities identified by local volunteers. This link has also fostered other connections enabling City staff, volunteers, Yale faculty, staff and students to work together and contribute in countless ways to improve the physical and social fabric of New Haven. GreenSkills Manager Katie Beechem writes of a current example on Audubon Street where a concerted effort by many partners is working to transform the street.

While URI has a nearly 30-year history of supporting community-driven, environmental initiatives in New Haven, Yale F&ES faculty, students and alumni working on local environmental issues dates back to the earliest days of F&ES. A colleague recently shared an article with me entitled "Looking After New Haven's Trees" from the 1914 Yale Forest School News. In this piece, New Haven Superintendent of Trees and F&ES alumnus George Cromie (1910) wrote about the outbreak of the elm bark beetle, and other challenges facing New Haven's tree canopy. Cromie also wrote, "One thing that directed most attention to our work was the enlistment of the schoolboys of the higher grades from each section of the city in the preparation of a planting plan." It turns out that an alumnus of F&ES was already engaging young people in New Haven in urban forestry—a century before URI's tree-planting program was developed as a way for Yale students to mentor New Haven high school student interns.

Another illustration of how we are responding to and supporting local priorities is planning a healing garden, which URI board member Melinda Tuhus describes in our cover article. Like all of our work, our involvement began with a request

from the community—in this case, New Haven teacher Marlene Pratt, who spearheads the project to memorialize victims of shootings. An impressive group of parents, designers, Yale staff and students, and City staff has forged a coalition of hope to create the healing garden and raise awareness to combat this tragic social issue that afflicts not only New Haven. My wish is this healing garden will be an example that motivates others to champion projects like this where nature can help us mend in our community and beyond.

Colleen Murphy-Dunning

Rock to Rock Earth Day & Greenspace

Join URI's Rock to Rock team for the 11th Annual Ride!

Rock to Rock is...

- New Haven's largest Earth Day celebration;
- A beautiful spring day of biking from West Rock to East Rock;
- A collaboration of URI and 28 other wonderful local organizations doing environmental work.

Cyclists choose from 5 routes. All start with breakfast at Common Ground and end with a Green Fair and Climate Rally in East Rock Park. URI's team needs volunteers, riders, and donors!

Sign up or donate here: www.rocktorock.donordrive.com/team/uri

URI is celebrating its 25th season of Community Greenspace! Throughout the season, we will be honoring the people who have made this program possible: our volunteers, partners, and funders!

Please mark your calendar for the following events celebrating:

- Long-term support from the Yale Class of 1964 on Thursday, May 30, 2019, in Edgewood Park
- Long-term support from the Yale Club of New Haven on Friday, June 28, 2019, in Beaver Ponds Park
- Founding partnerships with the City of New Haven and The Community Foundation for Greater New Haven on July 25 or 27, 2019, on the Farmington Canal
- End of Season Bus Tour of Community Greenspaces on Friday, August 2, 2019, starting at City Hall
- Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies administration and faculty and Yale's Office of New Haven and State Affairs on Thursday, August 22, 2019, at Cherry Ann Park in Newhallville.
- Volunteers on Tuesday, September 10, 2019, at Lighthouse Point

Check URI's website, uri.yale.edu, for additional events, registrations, and details.

Healing Memorial Garden

by Melinda Tuhus (continued from page 1)

I said, ‘He’s forgotten.’ I said we need something to remember these children by.” She got the newspaper to write a story saying grieving families needed a park.

Marlene had taken solace from visits to Yale’s Marsh Botanical Garden, a peaceful place with beautiful plants and a waterfall. She wanted such a place she could call her own. The director put her in touch with URI, and thus began a two-year, ongoing relationship.

“Chris [Ozyck, URI Associate Director] asked, ‘Do you want me to plant a tree [in his memory]?’ I said no, I want something big. I want something for all the mothers who lost children who can say our children are going to be remembered in the city. Chris and I spent months looking at many different places. He would call me at work and say, meet me at West River, and I’d have my heels on or whatever, and I’m walking through the woods, and he’d say, ‘Watch out, poison ivy, Marlene.’ So I started putting boots and sneakers in my car in case he called me.”

Marlene spoke with Mayor Toni Harp, who sent her to Becky Bombero, director of Parks, Recreation & Trees. “Becky told me I couldn’t do it alone, and to come back when I had a group.”

Next step: the Survivors of Homicide support group, run out of New Haven police headquarters. “When I walked into that first meeting with them, Officer Jillian Knox introduced me, and everyone introduced themselves with their name, their child’s name, and the year they lost their child.” She exhales deeply and adds, “I had found my peers.”

Knox led the mothers’ support group for eight years. She said, “It was a group that felt it was important to lift up and support another mother who had experienced the same kind of violence with their child. I appreciate Marlene’s vision, and the support group

wanted to support her vision. They liked it and wanted to be a part of it. That’s when they decided to come together and actively work on it and participate in it. You had mothers who had been grieving from the recent loss of their child who stepped right in to get involved in the project.”

Marlene says the group—which includes some dads and siblings but is powered by the moms—is 42 strong, with a nucleus of eight. They began outreach efforts to the neighborhood around the first site they hoped to use, but they didn’t win enough support and had to search elsewhere.

URI Director Colleen Murphy-Dunning, who has attended many community meetings with the mothers, says there were painful interactions at some of those meetings that amounted to blaming the victims. Marlene says her son was not involved in drugs or gangs, but Murphy-Dunning points out, in any case they didn’t deserve to die from street violence.

“I was at a heavy meeting and someone asked what’s been the impact on them. People talked about alcoholism, illness, depression, divorce. They didn’t get a chance to say goodbye. It’s painful for them to share, but they do it to convey the magnitude of the problem.”

She adds that the site on Valley Street is more beautiful than the first site, and the project has buy-in from the neighborhood.

Mayor Harp promised \$100,000 toward the project, and she also set up a meeting with then-Governor Dan Malloy, who pledged \$300,000 in bond funds. The State Bond Commission approved the funds in December 2018. The Board of Alders voted to accept the funds on February 28.

The architectural firm Svigals + Partners designed a conceptual plan pro bono. It came out of a broad outreach effort that included, first and foremost, the mothers’ group, but also URI, other victims’ families, community



Conceptual Plan of the Healing Garden

members, the city’s parks department, and a team of volunteer local designers.

A brochure describes the unique central focus of the garden: a collage of several figures, some of which “disappear” or blend into the background as one moves around it, “illustrating the ever-present sense of absence when loved ones are lost to tragedy.”

The design has yet to be finalized, and Murphy-Dunning emphasizes the central role the mothers have played and continue to play. “I say to Marlene all the time, this is your project. We’re here to support you. It’s not up to a designer or URI what the design will be.”

The mothers’ group has been operating under the timeline that includes all those murdered in the city from 1980 to the present. According to New Haven Police Department data, that’s an astounding 797 people—sons, brothers, fathers, husbands, daughters, sisters, mothers, and wives. One possible design element is a brick walkway that would include the death dates of each person, and the name if the family chooses, but Pratt says some of the mothers worry that they won’t have all the information needed to include everyone and so might opt for a different approach.

“I think it will be like the Holocaust or Vietnam memorials” in New Haven, Pratt says. “It will be a place to come and read a book, to enjoy nature. I want it to be a tranquil place

so people can reflect on their loved ones, and release some stress. Once we get the garden done so we can regain our strength, we want to go into the middle schools and have something like violence-prevention week, where we can talk about the dangers of guns.” She expresses her own view emphatically, “I can’t stand to be around them.”

She says of her group, “I used to do all the talking, but more people are stepping up.” In addition to Marlene, the core group of mothers includes Helena Coleman Moore, Pamela Jaynez, Winifred Cue, Damonnie Jones, Celeste Fulcher, Juanita Byrd-Pemberton, Patricia Brown-Edwards, and Celeste Bradley.

Students from Common Ground and Career high schools will be working at the site. Each mother is going to take one Saturday a year and bring other groups in to do beautification and maintenance.

Knox thinks the healing garden, by highlighting the carnage, might play a role in reducing it in the future.

“I’m excited,” she says. “I can’t wait for the groundbreaking.”

The mothers are still raising some of the money needed to finish the project. URI is acting as the fiduciary. “I trust them,” Marlene says. “They have our back. They have the expertise.” She is hoping for a groundbreaking this spring.

Photo credit: Svigals + Partners

Inspiring Awe on Audubon: Local Leadership and Collaboration Pave the Way for Tree Planting

by Katie Beechem

Anyone who walks down the western block of Audubon Street remembers it.

Though it spans only 500 feet between Whitney Avenue and Orange Street in the northeastern pocket of New Haven's downtown, this one block of Audubon offers a distinct atmosphere that is both modern in concept and traditional in appearance. Four-story red brick facades line either side of the narrow one-way street, reminiscent of the intimate streets of colonial Boston and welcoming to those on foot, bike, or car. The multi-color brick along the sidewalk shows its wear. In the summertime, a street-side plaza is dotted with colorful tables and plays host to students, business people, bus riders, artists, and the casual passerby. The exclamation point at the end of the block is the repurposed synagogue that now houses ACES Educational Center for the Arts, complete with stained glass windows and a pair of Gothic belfries.

For Arthur Nacht, a resident of the Audubon Court condominiums since 2003, the street's unique character, composition, and location have always held great appeal. Residences, nonprofit arts organizations, education centers, business offices, and a local coffee shop all share the same block and are within walking distance of downtown.

What wasn't appealing to him, however, were the street trees. For the last decade, the maple trees lining the street were in decline. The dead and dying branches stood out like bold sores along a street that was otherwise full of warmth and life. The city began removing them in 2017, and now the street is dotted with stumps.

For Nacht, re-establishing a healthy tree canopy along the block has been important for many reasons. For one, it is the "icing on the cake" for a street that he believes serves as a strong model of an accessible, aesthetically rich, functionally diverse space. Second,

Nacht recognizes the many benefits that trees offer beyond just their aesthetics. While the extensive brickwork along the street creates a unique atmosphere, it also absorbs and radiates heat, amplifying summer temperatures. Trees can provide pools of shade for comfort, easier breathing, and for lingering under with a friend or with a cold beverage from the cafe.

Finally, Nacht cares about providing something for future generations in the same way that past planting efforts established some of the most iconic and awe-inspiring trees in the city today. As Nacht observes, however, "It is relatively easy to plant trees in suburban and rural settings but far more difficult to plant trees in cities. Nonetheless, trees in urban places are worth the extra effort because they have a relatively greater impact on their surroundings."

Indeed, planting new trees along Audubon Street has not been simple. In New Haven, the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Trees only supports street-tree planting under two conditions: the location must contain adequate space for trees to thrive, and the tree adopter must commit to watering the trees for three years. Watering a single tree is one thing, but watering an entire block is another!



Photo credit: Katie Beechem

URI removed bricks from 14 tree pits to create more space for the new trees.

Recognizing that he couldn't do it alone, Nacht—with the help of Alder Abby Roth—organized meetings with the other stakeholders along the block to consider different strategies for tree care, such as hiring contractors, fundraising, soliciting volunteers, repairing spigots, and investing in water bags. URI prepared the street for planting by removing three tons of brick to expand the tree pits. All the while, Nacht shared updates with the group, extended gratitude to those involved, sought suggestions, and remained optimistic at every turn.

This winter, the stakeholders on Audubon Street, the Town Green Special Service District, and Yale University's property manager, Elm Campus Partners, reached a watering agreement that will clear the way for URI to plant the trees once the city's Parks Department removes the stumps. And while this achievement required the investment of time, energy, and creativity from many people—and is a remarkable example of collaboration among individuals, nonprofits, businesses, and city agencies—it is truly a testament to Nacht's passion and perseverance that the project is progressing.

As the cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead observed, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." It is true that this multi-year effort will culminate in only a stretch of trees along a single block in a small city. But it is perhaps for that very reason that Nacht's effort is so profound: it represents an act of hope for the future, an act of generosity for the next generation, an act of courage in endeavoring to sustain a legacy, and an act of humility to devote time and energy without expectation of acknowledgment.

In New Haven, Audubon Street already holds a special place as an important district for the arts. This spring, it will blossom into its full potential with 14 new trees. One can only imagine the artists, musicians, poets, and everyday people who might draw inspiration from their branches. As Walt Whitman writes in his poem *Song of the Open Road*, "Why are there trees I never walk under, but large and melodious thoughts descend upon me? / (I think they hang there winter and summer on those trees, and always drop fruit as I pass;)"



From left to right: Arthur Nacht (resident), Katie Beechem (URI), and Abby Roth (Ward 7 Alder) on Audubon Street.