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Success Stories

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The Future Unfolds at Overbrook Environmental Education Center



OEEC offers arts, literacy, nutrition, wellness, and environmental education programming for Overbrook youth and their families.

In 2004, the Collaborative worked with the center's founders, Jeroni and Gloria Shabazz of JASTECH Development Services, Inc., to re-envision a gritty former quarry on Lancaster Avenue as a place where Overbrook youth can get their hands dirty and their minds expand while experiencing and transforming the environment. Today, after over a decade of operation, the center is about to double in size and was recently the focus of an US EPA tour.

Jerome Shabazz, Executive Director of OEEC, says it all began with a volunteer gig with a science class at Overbrook High School in 2002 that happened to include his son. He immediately realized, "Students didn't have a relationship with the environment because they never got outside." As an environmental engineer at the time with Philadelphia Water, Jerome resolved to, "get kids out to see how the city manages their water."

"After that school year," he says, "teachers recognized a bump in their grades." So Jerome continued his work with a Department of Environmental Protection Growing Greener grant to develop a curriculum with a focus on creek restoration, habitat and tree identification, and watersheds. Grades went up again.

In Search of a Site

After three years of work in Overbrook's public schools, Jerome says, "The teachers said, 'What students really need is a *third place* outside of school and home to learn about the environment.' So, JASTECH went in search of a site."

"I didn't want to look at the usual suspects." He says. "There was a property for sale on Lancaster Avenue. As an environmental engineer, I looked at a map, of course, and saw a wonderful space behind the buildings."

But the site was in terrible shape. "It was sitting on top of an old quarry," says Jerome. "The quarry site was redeveloped in the 1950s as an A & P Supermarket and wine and spirits shop. After the A & P closed in 1982, a building supply company came in. They sold toxic products like paint and thinners, and they left all that stuff behind." Environmental testing also revealed arsenic, lead, PCBs remaining from transformers in the building."



The project site in 2012

Conceptual Design as Catalyst

Jerome says, "We had to make sense of what we were trying to do and engage the community who was skeptical about putting an education center on the commercial corridor." The Collaborative worked with Jerome's nonprofit organization, JASTECH Development Services, on an initial evaluation and a strategy for how to transform the site. The Collaborative's volunteer team included Viridian Landscape Studio and SMP Architects, supported by a structural engineer and cost estimator.

Jerome also wanted students to be involved, though he had to ask himself, "How do we bring into this nasty, toxic place and feel good about it?" The answer was AIA Philadelphia's Architecture in Education program, which used Overbrook Elementary School as its base. Students participated in a safe field survey and provided input to inform broad concepts for the center."

Tavis Dockwiller, principal of Viridian Landscape Studio, says, "JASTECH wanted the facility to be a safe, good place to learn and a facility that was sustainable through the use of green infrastructure. Not everyone was talking about that at the time." She adds, "In our conceptual design, we had to consider how we could do more than clean the site up... how we could make it a demonstrative site that the kids would change over time."

The team had to find a minimal, cost-effective approach for getting the center up and running. A building assessment by SMP Architects revealed that it made the most sense to start by renovating

the smaller building, the wine and spirits shop, rather than the supermarket. Another priority was to establish woodlands in the rear of the site.

And, of course, the plan featured sustainable ways to manage stormwater. “This was before the Office of Watersheds and Philadelphia’s green stormwater management plan existed,” says Jerome. “We wanted to show five ways of managing rainwater as a resource that worked within our site and budget,” says Tavis. The green stormwater infrastructure proposed for the site included a rainwater cistern, porous paving, a green roof, flow-through planters, and an infiltration swale



Putting Plans in Motion

The project was off and running when it received a US EPA Brownfields grant—unusual for a site in an urban area. Several members of the Collaborative volunteer team became part of the project team, says Jerome. “We were able to find our talent through working with the Collaborative.”

The site was challenging. “When we started work, we realized the quarry could be a big deal,” says Jerome. “When we needed to drill to place piping for the flow-through planters, the contractor nearly threatened to leave after breaking two drill bits on the quarry rock. It cost more to break this rock, so we had less of a budget for porous paving.”

And, sometimes, there was a need to improvise. Tavis recalls, “Jerome and his students installed the green roof on the former liquor store. It was not my perfect green roof with native plants... sod! But it allowed students to observe and measure the difference.”

In the back of the site, where mostly junk trees grew, the goal was to slowly transform it into a new woodland. Again, says Tavis, “It did not have to be ecologically perfect, it just had to be in the right trajectory.”

The quarry posed a different problem when OEEC had the opportunity to install a high-tunnel greenhouse through a Penn State USDA grant. “The quarry’s concave shape limited access to sunlight,” says Jerome. “The consultant said, ‘You’re going to have to lift this thing up to get full sun exposure.’ We did it by building decking over the concrete dividers between the bays that were once used to store rock and gravel.”

The Future Unfolds

Today, OEEC is home to arts, literacy, nutrition, wellness, and environmental education programming for Overbrook youth and their families. It stands out in a commercial landscape that includes a U-Haul Center, a KFC, and a laundromat. The front façade of the center is covered with

mosaic. A mural featuring a butterfly brightens the wall facing the center's courtyard. The entrance is softened by native plants and a rain garden, and the center has served as a catalyst for the planting of more than 50 street trees along Lancaster Avenue.

The fledgling woodlands now includes orchard trees, including pomegranates. Tavis says, "It's more beautiful than what we imagined." Adds Jerome, "It's the same gritty site. But it was once scary to walk by and dangerous to walk in. Now it's a lush, green, community space."

The center continues to evolve. OEEC has purchased the adjacent one-acre lot. Officials from the US EPA recently came to visit the site as an example of the impact that small urban brownfield remediation projects can have.

Tavis sees the center as more relevant than ever, "This isn't a place to leave picture-perfect with a care manual. It's a place for young people to experiment and make interventions. As we've seen from the recent marches, this is a generation that's more in tune, more engaged than we've been."



A Jefferson University design studio recently developed concepts for expanding onto the new

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