



Students turn a neglected park into a woodlands paradise

BY ELLI PANICHAS



EDITOR'S NOTE

The following reflection by the president of the Neutaconkanut Hill Conservancy in Providence was written after two College community-service projects at Neutaconkanut Hill, a city park. The projects, which took place the week before Fall 2009 semester classes began, were the 19th annual Urban Action program and the inaugural "Building Bridges" day of service. Building Bridges was one of several initiatives included in the College's revised, six-day New Student Orientation.

Urban Action entailed one large-scale project involving approximately 150 members of the Class of 2013 and 25 upperclassmen leaders. Building Bridges featured more than 1,100 members of the College community—led by the entire Class of 2013—working at 37 sites across Rhode Island, including Neutaconkanut Hill.



Neutaconkanut Hill IS 88 ACRES OF UNTOUCHED, NATURAL WOODLANDS. LOCATED ON THE EDGE OF A DENSELY POPULATED NEIGHBORHOOD OF HOMES AND SMALL BUSINESSES IN THE SOUTHWESTERN CORNER OF PROVIDENCE, IT IS AN OASIS IN A CROWDED URBAN SETTING.

The highest point in Providence, Neutaconkanut Hill offers panoramic views of the city and surrounding communities. With miles of trails and paths, it is a recreational and therapeutic jewel for hikers and walkers. Its benches provide respite and solitude.

Neutaconkanut, which means “home of squirrels,” holds value to other species of life, too. It is home to deer, fox, wild turkeys, pheasants, birds, and many other animals.

For years, the woodlands of Neutaconkanut Hill were forgotten and abandoned. More recently, a small organization known as the Neutaconkanut Hill Conservancy has worked to preserve this valuable, yet vulnerable, land. Our goal is to reintroduce this amazing green space to as many citizens as possible, so they can explore and experience all that these woodlands offer for our physical and psychological well being.

We are doing that, but we could not have accomplished this goal without Providence College and its students.

For the past four years, Urban Action (UA) students have volunteered one to two days on Neutaconkanut Hill. These students have restored hiking and walking trails, cleared brush, painted, repaired small bridges, installed water bars to protect against erosion, and cleared an overgrown, 18th-century cemetery.

This year, an additional corps of PC student

volunteers worked at the Hill as part of the new “Building Bridges” day of service.

Between Urban Action and Building Bridges, we estimated that the equivalent of 450 PC students volunteered more than 2,100 hours with our conservancy during the workdays of August 31, September 1, and September 5.

Monday and Tuesday were amazing. The UA groups were ready, organized, and eager to get to their projects. Many of the leaders had been here before and were familiar with the work. For some, it was their fourth year!

Building Bridges: productivity and pride
With strong leadership from College administrators and “experienced” UA students, Saturday’s Building Bridges program was an extremely successful, productive day as well. That morning, Father Shanley [College President Rev. Brian J. Shanley, O.P. ’80], Father Murphy [Rev. Brendan Murphy, O.P. ’87, vice president for student affairs administration], and I walked the trails for more than two hours. Father Shanley stopped to speak with students at various projects.

What a sight! There were more than 130 students. Father Shanley observed them digging and securing water-bars. He saw them wading in the brooks, clearing and repairing the stonewall edgings. They cleared trails developed by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in the mid-1930s. He showed pride as he watched

students remove overgrowth to expose magnificent geological outcroppings.

He saw them rake, cut limbs, spread woodchips along trails, develop small clearings for the woodland animals, and build rustic log benches at scenic areas for hikers and walkers to enjoy the views.

After touring the top of the Hill, Fathers Shanley and Murphy and I descended to the base. Here, students were trimming lower tree branches to “raise the canopy” for greater visibility, discouraging vandalism in these hidden areas.

Also at the base, a long-forgotten pond—we skated on it in the ’40s—was filled with old tires and debris. The students, one with waist-high wading boots, pulled more than 100 discarded tires from the water. They also cleared an original WPA stairway leading to the water and opened a circular walking path around the pond that was constructed in the ’30s.

One UA group leader had volunteered to return that Saturday to complete his earlier project, walking each trail with geo-mapping equipment.

All from The Neutaconkanut Hill Conservancy were in awe of the volume of work completed and the continued spirit of service demonstrated by so many students committed to making a difference in the community. We are accomplishing our goals, primarily with the genuine support of PC students.