

Community Engagement for Long-Term Greenway Success: A Mill River in Western Massachusetts

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Fifteen years ago, a group of citizens gathered informally to initiate a greenway along the twenty-mile Mill River that connects the Town of Williamsburg and City of Northampton. Using local energy and expertise, a greenway continues to emerge and has become part of the lives of citizens all along its path.

The Mill River Greenway Initiative aims to heal the broken bits of our place in this region and on this planet. We are calling families to the river to listen to it, study it, learn from it, dance in it, call to it in its Native name—Pawagonick, the place where ground meal is made. We are using multidisciplinary inquiries to understand what the river is telling us, and we are slowly constructing a physical ribbon of greenway to reconnect what historical use has chopped into pieces. In this process, we are allowing the river to heal so it is more resilient to climate change and we are a more cohesive community.

Members of the Mill River Greenway Initiative will present several of our successful activities and the significant limits we are working to expand. We propose a tripartite presentation:

Community Activities on the Mill River – From constructing a section of greenway to dancing in the river.

Ensuring Continuity – Integrating Mill River planning and activities with local governments and institutional rigor and organization with Smith College.

The Mill River in Context – The context of our work mirrors the white, educated middle-class composition of our presenters and members.

To try to keep ourselves honest, we practice a reiterative process of clarifying our individual intentions to allow shared intentions to emerge.

Long-term success will require incorporating the hopes and intentions of unrepresented communities. So far, we have failed to address this problem and are eager to explore any suggestions and experiences from other greenway initiatives.

Author Biographies

John Sinton's graduate training was in European and Russian history. In the sixties, he began postdoctoral studies in environmental planning and history at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. He became an environmental planning consultant and, in 1972, took a teaching job at Stockton University in New Jersey where he helped found the Environmental Studies Department. He has written books and articles on rivers and planning and has been part of the Mill River Greenway process since its beginning in 2019.

Carol Berner is regional coordinator of River of Words, a place-based education initiative integrating environmental science, literacy and the arts. She collaborates with local schools and community-based organizations to connect children to their watersheds, in partnership with the Connecticut River Conservancy and the Mill River Greenway Initiative. Carol is a lecturer in the education departments at Smith College and UMass Amherst, where she teaches a range of courses integrating theory and practice, including Methods of Teaching Reading and Issues in Early Childhood Education.

Reid Bertone-Johnson is a senior lecturer in the Landscape Studies Program at Smith College. He teaches a range of courses including design studios, GIS, Visual Storytelling, and landscape seminars. He also directs Smith's annual Landscape Studies Lecture Series. Reid's scholarship includes broad-scale landscape design, regional planning, and community engagement. He pursues his work in collaboration with his students in Smith's Greenway Lab, which he codirects with Gaby Immerman, Senior Lab Instructor in Biology. Reid also runs his own team of students who design, make, and deploy a mobile park-making kit – a ParKit, for use in community-engaged public design and planning initiatives.

Nicholas Dines taught at the University of Massachusetts for 35 years, where he also served as MLA Graduate Program Director. He produced books that combined design processes and site construction processes in an illustrated format. He worked with area hospitals to create “supportive healing environments” in exterior garden settings. His MLA Degree was earned at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. During the last 20 years, he has voluntarily worked to create public gardens and greenways to bring landscape design to everyday life within local communities that are connected by the Mill River and its tributaries.

Gaby Immerman has been teaching the core Botany and Horticulture courses at Smith College for 25 years. With Reid Bertone-Johnson, she directs the Greenway Lab, which has supported well over 50 applied learning projects in a range of disciplines for students across the Five Colleges. Her community engagement includes serving as a board member for regional land-based projects including Hilltown Land Trust and Grow Food Northampton. She holds a MSc in Sustainability Science from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

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Nancy Meagher is a painter/storyteller with Gallery A3, a small cooperative art gallery in Amherst, MA. Working with school children using museum artifacts to ignite a connection to their world has been a life passion for her. Nancy has found kindred spirits, working with MRGI educators in local schools. Her recent MRGI book, *Millicent and the Day it Rained Buttons*, a Mill River Fish Tale, pulls the reader into the story of the Mill River Flood of 1874, exploring curriculum framework's themes of social justice, community, civic duty, local history - and the joy of holding hands with a river. Nancy holds degrees from Rhode Island School of Design, BFA, and Lesley College Graduate School, M.Ed.

Terre Parker is a dance artist, educator and former member of Anna Halprin's Dance Company whose environmental performance, video, and visual scores have been presented nationally and internationally. As a teaching artist, Terre develops curriculum for diverse settings from schools to museums. Her work nurtures a felt kinship with earth through accessible approaches to movement and Arts Integrated Environmental Education. Terre serves as Associate Project Director, Museums10 Workforce Development for Five Colleges, Inc. A member of the International Interdisciplinary Artist Consortium, she holds certification in Anna Halprin's somatic approach, a BA from Mount Holyoke College and MFA Interdisciplinary Art from Goddard College

Amy J. Stephenson studied sociology at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She is a professor of Sociology at Springfield Technical Community College, where she is also the advisor of the LGBTQ+ Pride Club. Previously, she served as the academic advisor at the UMass Native American Student Support Services. Amy has received the STCC Sankofa Award and the Dr. Josephine White Eagle Scholarship Award at UMass Amherst. She was born and raised in Wisconsin and is a member of the Brothertown Indian Nation.