

# Garden of Healing

by Dylan Walsh

It was the summer of 2019, 21 years since her son had been shot and killed in New Haven, and Marlene Pratt was driving around the city with no destination. In neighborhoods ravaged by gun violence she would look for kids and young men standing on the corner. She would pull her car to the curb when she spotted them. From her trunk she would retrieve a white poster board covered with columns of names and she would hail the group. Excuse me! Can you help me with something? She hoped her gray hair would set them at ease and command their respect.

Weeks before, she had attended the groundbreaking ceremony for the New Haven Botanical Garden of Healing Dedicated to Victims of Gun Violence. Pratt had been the prime mover behind the garden. Years of meetings with city personnel, elected officials, funders, designers, engineers, community members—“too many meetings”—had, at last, led to the start of construction. Shovels finally chuffed and rasped in the ground. Dozens of families who had lost a child to gun violence, going back decades, were invited to visit the empty site that day. They signed a book and looked at Pratt’s poster to confirm the correct name and date of death for the one they had lost.

But there were more than 600 names stretching back to 1976. Pratt wanted to verify as many as she could, so she took the board on its tour, neighborhood to neighborhood. Some of the kids and men she greeted would ignore her or turn and walk away. Others would scan down the columns and indicate victims they had known. Pratt asked for their help: could they point her to the families left behind so she could confirm the information? She gave them flyers about the garden.

At one corner, she approached four men despite a chill of fear. She showed them the names and asked if they recognized anyone. The young man who appeared to be the leader nodded. “That’s my soldier,” he said, pointing to a name. “He served the organization well.” He continued to read the list, acknowledging soldiers, and as he did this Pratt stared intently at the tattoos on his face, in particular the inked tears by his eyes. The man pointed to one of the tears. “This one represents him,” he said, pointing first to the mark beside his eye, and then indicating another name on the board.

The fear had not left Pratt, but she asked if he would consider visiting the garden when it was completed. Perhaps he could bring some of his soldiers? He, in turn, asked where the garden was located, and when she told him it was being constructed along Valley Street, bordered by the West River, under the tall sanguine buttress of West Rock, he nodded and told her she had chosen a good spot.



“You think so?”

“That’s neutral ground,” he said.

“I was scared to death of that man,” Pratt later admitted, “but I wouldn’t let him know it.” She got a number where she could reach him.

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Pratt was at home in North Carolina in May of 1998 when she received a phone call informing her that her son was hospitalized with a gunshot wound. He had been living in New Haven, the city of his birth, for a year. Pratt fell to her knees to pray. A half hour later another call came to say that her son, Gary Kyshon Miller, 20 years old, had died.

For almost two weeks, Pratt waited on updates from the New Haven Police Department. With no leads forthcoming, she got in her car and drove to Connecticut. She stapled posters pleading for help to telephone poles and she left them on front porches and in mailboxes. She stopped cars at intersections to hand out business cards. She did this for a week. Nobody stepped forward to give a name. But a last-minute, serendipitous conversation with a young mother at a park led, eventually, to the arrest and conviction of the man who murdered her son. She was back in North Carolina when the police called with the news.

New Haven became a haunted city for Pratt, a dreadful place. She swore she would never return outside of family visits. But, given time to explore the future, we often find ourselves walking unforeseen avenues. Years later, Pratt did return to New Haven, where she became a science teacher at Hill Regional Career High School. In 2017,

she was driving home from work and saw yellow police tape along the road. She slowed to ask a girl on the sidewalk what happened and was stunned by the affectless way in which the girl explained it was just another person shot and killed. “This is the mentality we have in New Haven,” Pratt says. “Just another person. I had to process that. Is that how people felt when my son died?”

Ever since Pratt had moved back to New Haven, she had sought moments of reflection in the Marsh Botanical Garden, an eight-acre plot of land owned by Yale University, behind Marsh Hall at the top of Prospect Street. There, she met Eric Larson, who managed the garden. When Larson heard the story of her son, he directed her to URI. At URI Pratt was offered a tree planting in Gary’s honor. “A tree?” Pratt recalls thinking. “I don’t want something small. I want something for every mother who has lost a child in this city, a place that is beautiful where they can grieve.” Instead, she joined URI’s Greenspace program, which provided her technical and material support to carry out her plan. She met three other mothers—Pamela Jaynes, Celeste Robinson-Fulcher, and Winifred Phillips-Cue—at a survivors of homicide support group. Each of them had lost a child to gun violence, and each jumped at the opportunity to get involved in Pratt’s effort to build something beautiful.

At times, says URI director Colleen Murphy-Dunning, the project felt massive. The design and scope far surpassed Greenspace projects URI had supported before. “But the process fundamentally never strayed from our community forestry model—it was their idea, they wanted to create the

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space and they had the ownership, rights, and responsibilities that come with that,” says Murphy-Dunning. “I was a little uncertain how we would be able to support them to fully realize their idea, but also felt very committed to these moms. They had a beautiful and necessary vision. As a parent, I could imagine their loss.”

Once the Greenspace group was formed, “The journey was meetings,” Pratt says. The city committed in-kind resources, and raised funds from the state. Gifts from a graduate from the Yale School of the Environment, Jackie Fouse, and Dalio Philanthropies provided URI matching funds needed to carry out the project with the moms. Architectural firm Svigals + Partners designed the garden. URI and the City divvied up and managed procurement and construction contracts, and many volunteers worked with URI to plant the garden. Over the course of two committed years permissions fell slowly into place, an idea slowly became manifest.

Ground was broken on May 20 of 2019, 21 years to the day after Pratt learned her son had been killed.

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Though unfinished, the garden opened to families this past November. Mothers and fathers and siblings and relatives who had lost someone to gun violence were given tours led by Pratt, Jaynes, and Robinson-Fulcher. (Winifred Phillips-Cue passed away during the garden’s construction.) A father who had not attended his son’s funeral, the emotion too raw at the time, came through and opened himself to grief. A sister whose brother’s ashes had been scattered into the waters off Lighthouse Point visited and said her brother no longer felt forgotten, slowly slipping from her life. He had a place to be commemorated.

The garden rolls out from a low berm along Valley Street. At its entrance, a series of chimes ring in the wind. A brick pathway segmented by year, starting in 1976, catalogs the names and ages of those killed in New Haven by gun violence. Centered in the garden is a statue of a family composed of metal slats, the image separating and dissolving as you walk past, then again taking shape as the walkway ends at a Tree of Life planted in the center of a circular plaza. There is a set of benches, too, envisioned as an outdoor classroom.

“Part of Marlene’s dream is to be able to bring young students down here” to talk about gun violence, says Jaynes. “She wants to strike a chord that will turn them around if someone is trying to lead them in the wrong direction.” Pratt has been developing a middle school curriculum to this end; she has also reached out to Eastern Connecticut State University to develop a men-



Photo credit Angela Chen.

torship program for New Haven middle schoolers.

More broadly, the garden is designed to spark conversation and action around the crisis of gun violence afflicting cities across the U.S. Pratt wants visitors to enjoy the garden’s tranquility, but she also wants visitors, especially those who have not lost a child to gun violence, to be deeply unsettled by the unfurling list of engraved names, most of them young men; the average age is 26. She wants people to feel compelled to join the search for solutions.

Robinson-Fulcher, too, spoke to the role of the garden in creating change. When it opens in June of 2021, she hopes that the garden will force communities across New Haven to more fully recognize the magnitude of the crisis. “This is a huge problem—I know from personal experience—and people really need to start talking about it,” she says. “I want to be heard. I hope somebody hears.”

As of the publication of this article, New Haven has recorded nine homicides since January 1, 2021. That’s nine more bricks, engraved with names and dates and sunk in the earth at the far



The Lost Generation sculpture. Photo credit Angela Chen.

end of the walkway: Alfreda Youmans, 50. Jeffrey Dotson, 42. Jorge Osorio-Caballero, 32. Marquis Winfrey, 31. Joseph Mattei, 29. Kevin Jiang, 26. Angel Rodriguez, 21. Dwaneia Turner, 28, and Alessia Mesquita, 28.

Justin Elicker, the mayor of New Haven and father of two, described work on gun violence as the issue he has “struggled most with despite everything we faced in the past year and a half.” The challenge is intertwined with larger, systemic problems of poverty, generational disinvestment, and historical inequities between white communities and communities of color. Recent data on gun-violence mortality released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that Black men aged 15 to 34 accounted for 37% of gun-violence victims in 2019 despite making up only 2% of the country’s population. That figure is 20 times higher than it is for white males of the same age group.

Progress, said Elicker, is going to take time. The urgent question is how much time. “The saddest thing about the walkway is that there is space for many more bricks,” he says. “That’s a reflection point for all of us to consider: how are we going to make this walkway, covered in names, as short as possible?”

Pratt made the same point, though obliquely, even incidentally, as she described one of her early meetings with New Haven’s Department of Parks and Public Works. Pratt and Phillips-Cue were negotiating the size of the parcel that would be set aside for the garden. Pratt had always envisioned an acre, but there was discussion about whether or not that might be too much. Would a volunteer group be able to actively maintain so much space? Would a half-acre be more pragmatic? “And Winnie said no, we want all of it. We don’t know what’s going to come on the other side of this process and we want all of it,” Pratt recalled. “When I saw the list of names, I thought, thank God we asked for an acre.”

A version of this article is forthcoming in *The Trace*.

# Sowing Awareness

*Local Students Identify Next-of-Kin of Victims of Gun Violence*

by Hannah Foley

We scrolled through the 623 names slowly, taking our time to read each one. The Excel sheet consisted of mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, neighbors, and friends—all lost to gun violence. Together on Zoom, we began our work.

FOCUS on New Haven is a pre-orientation program that pairs incoming first-year Yale College students in weeklong service projects, like digging, planting and general outside work, with New Haven community partners. Due to the pandemic, this year's service project with URI would be done entirely remotely. The seven Yale first-years were given a list of New Haven's gun-violence victims since 1976 and tasked with finding their next-of-kin in the New Haven Botanical Garden of Healing Dedicated to Victims of Gun Violence last fall.

Undeterred by the brevity of time, and using social media, the white pages, and online obituaries, the first-years found 30 in their FOCUS week. Next, rather than concentrate on their usual tree-planting internships with URI, six Common Ground High School students were asked to plumb their deep knowledge of local neighborhoods and residents. After listening to weekly guest speakers, mostly mothers, explain the significance of the project and then talking with many in town they knew, the students identified over 275 family members to invite for the garden's first family viewing last November. Their efforts resulted in broadly widening awareness of the emotional impact of gun violence and understanding of how vital the New Haven Botanical Garden of Healing Dedicated to Victims of Gun Violence is for all of the community to heal.

*Hannah Foley is a pre-orientation leader for Yale's FOCUS on New Haven. She worked as a GreenSkills Supervisor for the GreenSkills Internship with Common Ground High School in Fall 2020 which focused on issues of gun-violence in New Haven.*



Names of victims inscribed on bricks along the Magnitude Walkway. Photo credit Angela Chen.