



**COMMON GROUND**

HIGH SCHOOL, URBAN FARM, AND  
ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION CENTER

# TAKING ROOT *Together*



*Gratitude Report*

Thank you for being part of our community

2015-2016



## A Message from Common Ground's Board Chair

– *Frank Mitchell, Board Chair*

Photo credit: Harold Shapiro

**T**he great joy of being Common Ground's Board Chair has been thanking colleagues, staff, students, supporters, and friends for all they've done to realize our dreams. In my final days as Chair I am glad to have this spot in the Gratitude Report to be grateful, officially, one last time. I spend large parts of my day considering how objects, artifacts, and art can inform our daily practices and improve our lives. On the best days, I can see evidence of cultural programming and history fostering or sustaining community.

And those successes push everything else forward. Part of Common Ground's promise was the imperative to teach through the incredible resources of West Rock – a New Haven artifact with years of history surrounding it. And it is gratifying that Common Ground has grown into its promise as a school, farm, environmental center, and community asset; it is more than I imagined when I joined up with the band of educational and environmental visionaries. But even more gratifying has been the steady nurturing and support of a community of students, teachers, campers, camp parents, staff, alumni, elected officials, and residents who believed in this idea over the years.

It would not have been possible without that community and it really couldn't be called Common Ground. I thank you for believing in this dream with us and for all the good we've created together. Thanks, for everything, and enjoy the four stories we've included in this report, which illustrate the impact you make as a Common Ground supporter.



**On October 25, 2016, Bob Parker and Wendy Battles were elected as Common Ground Board Co-Chairs. All of us at Common Ground thank Frank for his incredible leadership of our board – and join him in thanking all of you for helping our work take root.**

## A Message from a Common Ground High School Parent

— Babz Rawls-Ivy, Board member and parent  
of 2 Common Ground High School students

Photo credit: Karen King

**H**igh school is its own kind of challenge. It is good to know that in this place there are folks who have their eyes and ears and arms around this fragile and complex group of young people – young people from all sorts of backgrounds and cultures, cultivated on a farm, a place where things are grown organically....students and vegetables alike.



There are days when I am not on top of my parenting game. In those moments I am unbelievably grateful for the entire Common Ground team. See, I appreciate the rigorous academic program, and all the extracurricular activities presented. But what I am most blown away by is the willingness of teachers and staff to go the distance with a student when issues arise that are outside or adjacent to academic pursuit.

I experienced this first-hand when my son was a freshman. Struggling with his academic load and the newness of high school, his teachers Ms. Frasier, Mr. Greene, and Ms. Miriam Sheffield met with us to craft a plan on how to turn his failure into success. They never wavered in their commitment and concern for his well-being. Even when I, as the mother was worn thin.

I have seen this team pull together to resolve issues not with just my children, but with several students. I've seen restorative justice in action. I've seen teachers go to bat for students.

I love the way the cafeteria folks interact and talk to and engage students. This is why my children are here. This is why I do what I can, when I can, for this place.



**In 2015, Common Ground's 4-year graduation rate was 100% – more than 10 points above the state average. We believe that every student can succeed in high school, and meet high standards, if given the supports they deserve.**

## Planting Seeds

— Tricia Heiser, *Environmental Educator*



**A**t the start of a recent school field trip, a second grader named Rayna rushed up to me and tightly gripped my hand. She blurted out: “I’m scared to go in the woods. Will we see a tiger?” I assured her we would not see a tiger, but she still looked worried. During our two hour hike we listened to birds calling, climbed on a giant log, noted how birch twigs smell like root beer, and even found a salamander under a log. Near the end of the hike, Rayna ran up to me and exclaimed, “I really like hiking in the woods now. This is fun!”

I see this again and again at Common Ground: we challenge students to get out of their comfort zones and experience new things. It might be hiking in the woods, eating fresh kale from our garden, or touching a live goat. I love seeing the look of sheer delight on students’ faces as they make new discoveries!

As students try something new and have a positive experience, they build self-confidence and broaden their worldview. When these positive experiences happen outdoors, it helps them develop a love and respect for nature. Rayna and many others like her demonstrate how we are shaping a community that values green spaces and gardens, and empowering the next generation of environmental stewards.

# 100%

of visiting teachers said our educators were positive and welcoming

In 2015, Common Ground welcomed more than 5,500 young people from grades K-8, and 900 of their teachers, to Common Ground for educational field trips. When we followed up to ask teachers about their experiences, 100% of those who responded said the experience was developmentally appropriate, and 100% said our educators were positive and welcoming.

We know that all our students can grow into successful college students and powerful environmental leaders. Last year, 100% of our seniors successfully defended portfolios showing their growth as leaders. Ninety percent of these grads were accepted into college, and 86% enrolled in college or training programs in the year after graduation.

## Growing Leaders

**“Common Ground tries to teach their students to be environmental leaders, but they are doing way more than that. They are helping their students to have a voice, and to stand up in any situation, and to be true leaders.”** – Janet Sakouvogui, CG class of ‘15.

**86%**  
enrolled in college or  
training programs

*We asked recent grads to tell us what they were doing last year, and want you to know they continue their growth as leaders:*

**Malik Joyner** has been “balancing college and work planting trees with the Urban Resources Initiative, finding time to complete my studies while doing work that makes our community stronger.”



**Dante Petti** spent the summer after freshman year “in China, conducting interviews about the migrant labor issue.” He got back in time “to protest the North Dakota access pipeline.”

**Janet Sakouvogui** struggled to find her place as one of the only students of color on a small college campus – facing overt racism and an unresponsive college administration. She ultimately decided to transfer to another college, but built a student club to advocate for change before doing so. “I realized my college was not built for students of color. I started thinking about other students of color, and I created a club called the ROOTs, which is for anybody who calls themselves a student of color. After creating this group with three other students, I realized that I was a strong person. I realized that there isn’t anybody in this world that can break me down and make me hate my skin color.”



Photo Credit: Mel Morales



## Cultivating Community



*Conte West Hills Magnet School faculty share their experiences with their school garden (established 2013) and schoolyard habitat (established 2016):*

“I watched this amazing team take our vision and make it reality. There were parents, kids, teachers – just an awesome experience of working together.

Our students are so excited. They’re asking about when they can go out all the time. Our youngest run out and notice that the radish seeds have come out, the buds on our flowers, and enjoy the wonder of finding insects.”

*– Julie Peterman, pre-k teacher*

“Common Ground students came on work days and were very polite, very friendly, and very helpful. I knew some of them from when they were in elementary school, and it was amazing to see them back here to give back.”

*– Carole Anderson, art teacher*

“In first grade, students learn about habitats. Now, there are habitats right here. Students are suddenly so much more observant.”

*– Diane Huot, 1st grade teacher*

“I try to engage my sixth graders in current environmental issues – and being able to get them outside, and see it, is so powerful. They were excited when I explained that our oasis is like a pit stop along their migration. It brings nature closer to them, to a more personal level.”

*– Alex Novak, 6th grade science teacher*

# 16

New Haven public schools to date have created gardens and/or schoolyard habitats with help from Common Ground

To date, Common Ground has helped 16 New Haven public schools create gardens and schoolyard habitats – and turn these growing spaces into outdoor classrooms. Research by our partners at Audubon Connecticut demonstrates that participating teachers go outside to teach a lesson 57% more often.

The timber used in Common Ground's new building offsets the annual emissions of 107 cars, making the building carbon neutral in its first decade of operation. The collective impact of geothermal power, natural lighting, computer-controlled heating and cooling systems, and other energy efficiency measures are projected to reduce overall annual energy use by 60%.

## Taking Root

— Melissa Spear, Common Ground Executive Director

It has been more than 6 months since we finished construction, yet walking onto our campus each morning I am still amazed at how the addition of our new building has completely transformed our site. I still think back fondly to the raw beauty of the Common Ground site of 9 years ago when I first came to work here. While at times I miss those rough edges, I also remember a constant fight to keep invasive plant species from overwhelming the landscape; the floods raging across our campus with each significant rain event; and the anxiety we suffered when field trip buses had to park on Springside Avenue to let kids onto our site.

Although very different from 9 years ago, I am still struck by the beauty of our site each day as I arrive at work. But now, new design features welcome visitors and enhance our site's functionality. For example, the walking path from the parking lot compels visitors to take in the bounty of our farm as they approach our campus. A beautifully landscaped rain garden, designed to capture, cleanse and infiltrate rainwater flowing across our site, greets visitors as they walk up to the new building. To the right, where once there was only a drainage ditch and a tangled mass of vegetation, a common grassy area now provides a welcoming gathering space. Nearby is the Javier Martinez wetland, chock full of frogs and turtles...and often young program participants too!

And these changes have impacted programs deeply and broadly! Our programs are richer, safer, and have more beautiful and more functional space to operate in. Your support made this possible.



**60%** projected reduction in overall annual energy use thanks to our new building's efficiency measures



**P**eople are the measure of a building's worth. By that measure, our building is priceless. Starting in 2012, you and hundreds of others helped raise more than \$2.1 million to transform our place, laying the groundwork for bringing thousands more every year to experience Common Ground. Your support helped us take root:

- ✓ Designing and building a new, award-winning green building
- ✓ Renovating our first, aging school building
- ✓ Creating the Javier Martinez Wetland in honor of one of our students lost to gun violence
- ✓ Re-establishing a native landscape to provide habitat for birds and pollinators, and to capture and clean stormwater

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# Common Ground Board of Directors

**FRANK MITCHELL** *Chair, Cultural Historian*  
(Ended term as Chair, October 24, 2016)

**MICHAEL DOOLITTLE** *Vice-Chair, Photographer/Photojournalist* (Ended term as Vice-Chair, October 24, 2016)

**KIM FUTRELL** *Treasurer, City of New Haven*  
(Rotated off the Board in 2016 – thank you for your service!)

**JANE LEE** *Yale University Business Operations* (Elected Treasurer October 24, 2016)

**CLAUDIA MERSON** *Secretary, School Committee Chair, Yale Office of New Haven & State Affairs*

**WENDY BATTLES** *Yale University; Health and Nutrition Consultant* (Elected Board Co-Chair October 24, 2016)

**MONIQUE FRASIER** *Faculty Representative, Common Ground High School*

**BENJAMIN GARDNER** *Pollen – Urban Farming & Beekeeping* (Rotated off the Board in 2016 – thank you for your service!)

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**BETH KLINGER** *Artist, Educator and Entrepreneur*

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**ROBERT PARKER** *Retired School Principal & Communications Executive* (Elected Board Co-Chair October 24, 2016)

**BABZ RAWLS IVY** *Parent Representative, Inner City News*

**MELISSA SPEAR** *Executive Director, Common Ground*

See our financial report online at [www.commongroundct.org/numbers/](http://www.commongroundct.org/numbers/)

## What's Next?

**You can help us (again) to take root. Here are two ways:**

1. Send in a personal gift. Use the envelope enclosed with this annual report to send us a contribution of an amount that is significant to you – all gifts are important to us.
2. Share a story of how Common Ground made a difference to you, a friend, or family member. We'd like to share your stories in upcoming newsletters!



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