



CELEBRATING
25 YEARS

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TO Design celebrates 25th anniversary by giving back to the City of Hartford

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TO Design, a New Britain-based landscape architecture and engineering firm, was looking for a special way to celebrate their 25th year in business. Founding principal Phil Barlow was determined to find the perfect outlet to commemorate this special time - one that blended the firm's core business of sustainable design with the staff's philanthropic spirit and desire to give back to the communities they serve.

Project manager Mark Fisher suggested a tie in to the National Day of Service. Barlow loved the idea, and they decided that they would apply this concept at a local level - to commemorate this important milestone with its own 'day of service' on the most solemn of national anniversaries, September 11th.

"It has been our privilege to work with so many excellent clients and consultants, many of whom have 'grown up' with us," said Barlow. "We have done a great deal of work in the City of Hartford over the last 25 years, and we thought that the capitol city would be a great place to concentrate our efforts."

Fisher kicked things off by brainstorming with a personal contact, community outreach director Charmaine Craig of Knox, a Hartford-based organization focused on funding community development and operating greening programs. Plans began to take shape internally, and it was collectively decided that TO Design's staff would donate time and labor to help transform an inner city school campus into a place that students and faculty would take pride in. "We thought this was a perfect way to give back to a community that has been supporting our firm for decades," Barlow remarked.

Quite the coincidence.

In working with their longstanding client, Hartford Public Schools, it was decided that Thirman Milner School (officially renamed Jumoke Academy Honors at Milner), would be the best focus for the planned project. Milner School is located on Vine St. in Hartford in the epicenter of one of the most economically challenged areas in all of Connecticut. With approximately 450 students, grades pre-k to 8, it has historically been one of the lowest achieving schools in Connecticut.

Jumoke Academy Honors at Milner is the centerpiece of a high priority academic turnaround project through a new partnership comprised of the State of Connecticut, Hartford Public Schools and Jumoke Academy. Jumoke Academy is infusing its model of academic excellence to help turn Milner into one of the state's most improved schools. The plan is to create a culture of excellence at Milner that insists on high standards, accountability and respectful behavior.

Coincidentally, TO Design's very first assignment with the City of Hartford was for the design of a new courtyard and play areas at the Milner campus in the mid-90s.

Fast forward to 2012 and the grounds were in desperate need of attention. Facility conditions affect the morale, and therefore, the performance of students and faculty alike. Tight school budgets require prioritized spending and grounds keeping services are oftentimes deemed non-essential. When executive director Stan Simpson and Hartford public school officials were contacted about the opportunity to refresh the grounds, the stars seemed perfectly aligned. It was a green light from the first conversation.

A day of service

This day of service represents an amazing convergence of events: an idea to give back, the celebration of congruent anniversaries and the enthusiastic cooperation of multiple organizations to donate desperately needed services.

Barlow, Fisher and co-workers Glen Martin and Jim LeBlanc worked side-by-side with 20 volunteers from Knox and AmeriCorps to devote a full day to a labor of love - giving back to their city and providing a better learning environment for needy students. Efforts consisted of plantings, removing unwanted vegetation from fences and buildings, edge trimming, mulching around trees and planting beds, weeding and general site cleanup. Stonehenge Landscaping and Millane Nurseries generously donated tools and equipment as well as trees and shrubs.

"We were all there in support of a common goal - improving the grounds and creating a place that students would take pride in. It's a great to have people from all walks of life coming together for a good cause," said Fisher.

Throughout the course of the day, faculty, staff and visitors took notice of the beautification efforts and expressed their appreciation to the volunteers.

TO Design plans integrate the concept of an annual community service day as part of the firm's culture.