



Space to Grow, Time to Flourish

On a beautiful fall day, Esperanza Baeza, known as Ms. Baeza to her students and community, walked over to the blossoming vegetable and herb garden at Grissom Elementary's schoolyard. It's been eight years since the ribbon was cut on this Space to Grow® schoolyard, and it's thriving. To the students, teachers, and surrounding community, it's become more than a schoolyard and grown into a community gathering space, quiet and safe nature sanctuary, and recreational park.

“Since the schoolyard transformation with Space to Grow, the students have been very observant about nature. What a difference! Before, we could only look at the asphalt. Now, when I'm outside with the students, they want to show me everything they see. ‘Ms. Baeza, Look it! Look it! Ms. Baeza, the flowers are growing!’ Now, they talk about fireflies, grasshoppers, and little spiders—which is precious. I do yoga in the morning and a running club with the students. Seven o'clock, we use the track, and we look at it like, Whoa! You see the kids just sitting, talking, quietly reading a book. This is a space where kids can do all that now. It just warms my heart.”

The program's first phase, which included 34 schools, is now complete. Ms. Baeza and her community at Grissom Elementary's journey in Space to Grow, the first schoolyard transformation, is just one example of the program's impact.

Innovation through Partnership

Space to Grow is a model for supporting communities where investment is needed most—improving health, learning, and access to nature while helping cities combat climate change. From the start, the program's process centers equity and environmental justice—from choosing the schools that participate to ongoing education and investment. Space to Grow does more than reconstruct a schoolyard into a stormwater solution; it provides the support necessary to create a cultural shift within schools, communities, and government agencies.

This innovation is the work of a strong partnership: as a program co-managed by Openlands and Healthy Schools Campaign, schools participate in a community-centered process that creates ownership

and pride. The program's capital partners—Chicago Public Schools, the Chicago Department of Water Management, and the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago—provide the space, collaboration, and investment for change at schoolyards and within communities.

What is a Green Schoolyard?

Green schoolyards are multi-functional school grounds that include places for students, teachers, caregivers, and community members to play, learn, explore, and grow. Space to Grow schoolyards have another layer of purpose that most other green schoolyards don't: they are designed by and for the entire school community, replacing expanses of asphalt with landscaping that absorbs rainwater, helping to address neighborhood flooding issues.

Why do we need Green Stormwater Infrastructure (GSI)?

Chicago has a combined sewer system that is frequently overloaded as storms become heavier and more frequent. This leads to issues from flooding, basement backups, and combined sewer overflows. Combined sewer overflows, or CSOs, happen during extreme rain events when the sewer pipes are overwhelmed with rainwater and sewage, and they bypass the treatment plant, which can impact the health of our rivers, streams, and ecosystems.

Green stormwater infrastructure (GSI) is a nature-based solution to water quality issues that urban stormwater runoff causes. It provides greater benefits than conventional (or “Gray”) stormwater solutions. Green infrastructure like native plants and trees, and permeable pavement intercept stormwater by soaking it into the ground, evaporating it into

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the air, and reducing the amount of water that goes into the sewer. In addition to better stormwater management practices and improved water quality, GSI provides benefits such as beautified communities, improved public health, the creation of ecological habitat, and enhanced local economic vitality. Green schoolyards like Space to Grow minimize the occurrence of CSOs and flooding in neighborhoods by retaining at least 150,000 gallons of water per schoolyard every time it rains. Green stormwater infrastructure like Space to Grow is a key tool for cities like Chicago to combat urban flooding and combined sewer overflows that occur more often due to climate change.

Transforming with Intention + Collaboration

Reflecting on the moment back in 2013 when Grissom Elementary's Principal announced that they would receive the Space to Grow schoolyard transformation, Ms. Baeza remembers her excitement and trepidation—and how the community-centered, intentional process gave her hope.

"They saw me. They saw my excitement and my actual look, 'Oh my God, a garden in our school!?' I was super excited. I became the Garden Team Leader, and at the time, I didn't know anything about gardening, but I was just so excited, even though I thought it was too good to be true. But throughout—we made the decisions. We got a chance to choose the colors of the playground, where the stones would be—everything. And then I really believed it was going to happen. Afterward, we were, like, *super* excited. I promise you that ever since then, I've learned so much. You can learn."

Grissom and other Space to Grow schools are chosen through an equity and environmental justice-based process that looks at flooding data, Chicago Public School's equity index that includes health, wellness, and learning data, and the state of the existing schoolyard and play equipment at the school. This highly-focused selection criterion identifies schools and communities that lack adequate spaces for physical activity, desire programs that will promote health and wellness, and experience severe flooding caused by basement backups. Using a series of steps based on these criteria, Space to Grow partners identify eligible schools and invite school leaders to apply for a schoolyard transformation, prioritizing vulnerable and underinvested schools and communities.

The cornerstone of Space to Grow's success is engaging with the people who will ultimately use the space and whose neighborhood and lives will change because of it from the beginning. The application is an essential part of the process. Space to Grow schoolyards effectively become community parks open to neighbors of all ages to utilize and enjoy, and so schools

Play



have to understand and be ready to implement that cultural shift. It's a crucial moment to underscore the importance of the schoolyard as a place where health and connection to nature can take place long after the school day is done.

Once selected, each schoolyard is designed by and for its respective community, using an inclusive process that invites students, parents, school staff, community members, and nearby residents to provide input and identify priorities. Throughout this collaborative community meeting process, Openlands and Healthy Schools Campaign build relationships and partners at each school, ensuring parents are engaged, invited, and informed. The design process supports how the schoolyard will look and, just as important, creates pride and ownership of the space for the future sustainability of this new neighborhood park.

It's also an essential educational experience throughout. As a program that replaces impermeable asphalt with water-absorbing materials and landscaping like mulch, native plants, and trees, it takes time and conversation to help people understand and appreciate the new green infrastructure. As the process continues, people of all ages learn the benefits of holding water on site rather than rushing it to the sewers (and sometimes their basements) and appreciate the beautiful, functional spaces where they can be active, learn outdoors, garden, and have fun. The school and community begin to see their schoolyard as a living laboratory, activating the outdoor classroom that exists in every Space to Grow Schoolyard and embedding nature education within their curriculums.

Upon completing the design and construction process, Space to Grow partners host a ribbon-cutting ceremony with the students, school, and community to celebrate the final schoolyard transformation. More than just a celebratory moment, these rituals set the tone for the next phase of the program.

Tending the Garden, Nurturing the Community

After the construction ends and the ribbon is cut, Space to Grow continues to support the school and community. Together the partners work with schools like Grissom to ensure the new schoolyard thrives. Each school receives two years of partner support. Openlands and Healthy Schools Campaign nurture the creation of wellness teams to make certain the schoolyard is incorporated into physical education and recess plans, garden teams to take ownership of the various gardens, and the development of parent leadership at the schools.

Flood Control



Access to Nature

Educational support is also offered. For Openlands, this includes access to professional development for teachers, helping them integrate outdoor learning into their curriculum, or bringing its inquiry-based program, *Birds in my Neighborhood®*, to the school. This vital aftercare supports a healthy and sustainable cultural shift from a school that rarely played or engaged outdoors to one that sees its schoolyard as a vital enrichment resource and educational tool. Even after the two-year support period ends, schools like Grissom continue to benefit from Openlands educational programming long-term. This comprehensive approach helps integrate the schoolyard into school life in successful and sustainable ways.

Cultivating Support for Green Infrastructure

Outside of schools, Openlands and Healthy Schools Campaign educate, promote, and support the essential management of this new green infrastructure with capital partners. From leading green infrastructure workshops with schools to creating management plans with Chicago Public Schools, the program transforms how city agencies and the City as a whole think about, implement, and manage green infrastructure. As one of the largest landowners of impermeable surfaces in Chicago, Chicago Public School and the capital partners' investment in Space to Grow continues to change how stormwater flows in one of the nation's largest and most flood-prone cities.

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Influence

Space to Grow has served as a model in cities like Paris, France and Rotterdam, Netherlands. The program has received numerous awards.



Support

Continuing to Learn

This year, Ms. Baeza won the 2022 Chicago Excellence in Gardening Award—a testament to her hard work and dedication to the school and its schoolyard. Almost ten years later, she speaks about Space to Grow's impact on her and her students, "Now, with the ground being permeable, you know, the water goes in, and all this stays beautiful.

Before, at my house (I'm just a block and a half away), I remember having a couple of floods. But now? Never. And even better, the students really respect this place. They have taken ownership. I know because they help me care for it. They help me clean up. They help me water the plants. Sometimes when I come in the evenings, they come over. They're helping me, and the parents see that...We're still learning. We're still trying to see what we can do."

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With the first phase of Space to Grow complete, Openlands, with Healthy School Campaign and the program's capital partners, is taking stock of all that has been accomplished and planning for the next phase of this innovative program. Space to Grow has been funded with \$48 million from the City of Chicago and its capital partners in 2022, supporting at least another 30 schoolyard transformations for the next five years—support for people like Ms. Baeza, her beloved students, and her community to keep learning and growing. **To learn more about the program, visit spacetogrowchicago.org**

An Impact of a Lifetime

WHEN MARJORIE DAVID MOVED from the neighborhood of Beverly to the South Loop in Chicago in the early 2000s, she knew she had to find new ways to cultivate her love of nature. Her brother, Keith Beasley, said he believes living in the city inspired her appreciation for green space. A devoted gardener, she grew many plants including milkweed for her beloved monarch butterflies from her 16th floor South-facing balcony.

She spent more than 30 years at the *Chicago Tribune* where she served in a variety of roles, including as assistant editor of the *Tribune's* "Home & Garden" section, which allowed her to learn more about her passions including gardening and photography. Nature was the central theme of her photo collages and artwork said her friend Carol Haddix, retired food editor for the *Tribune*. An avid birder, Marjorie volunteered at the Field Museum of Natural History after she retired from the *Tribune* where she helped to prepare its avian collection.



Marjorie passed away in August 2021 leaving a significant gift to Openlands. Her family believes her appreciation for nature and the effects it suffered as a result of climate change may have led her to include Openlands in her estate plans. "She liked everything that you do," said Mary Fowlie, David's sister-in-law.

Her generous gift will provide support to many of Openlands programs and help inspire the next generation of advocates for nature across the Chicago region. The Green Legacy Society recognizes donors who leave a gift to Openlands in their estate plans. To learn more about including Openlands in your will, living trust, or life insurance policy—contact Stephanie Carper at 312-863-6283 or scarper@openlands.org.



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Same Mission, New Look

This past fall, Openlands unveiled a refreshed brand that honors our past, captures our ambitious vision for the future, and more fully represents our work throughout the region. The logo mark reflects the trees, trails, land, and waterways of northeastern Illinois and the surrounding region that Openlands protects, while the color palettes embody the array of bold and elegant hues brought to life each season.

While we have a new look, our mission remains the same—to protect the natural and open spaces of northeastern Illinois and the surrounding region to ensure cleaner air and water, protect natural habitats and wildlife, and help balance and enrich our lives. We are more committed than ever to conserving nature for life.

OPENLANDS GRATEFULLY ACKNOWLEDGES LEAD SUPPORT FROM:



PICTURED (left to right): Students at Orozco Elementary on their new playground; a sign at Grissom Elementary educates people on the power of green infrastructure; students at Wadsworth school tend the garden; a parent makes mud muffins at Openlands' "Nature Play Workshop"; teachers wait on bikes during the "Teaching Environmental Justice" workshop led by Openlands at Big Marsh Park.

CREDITS (left to right): Space to Grow, Lucia Whalen, Ashley Lane.

Celebrating Grasslands as a Powerful Climate Solution

THE OPENLANDS ANNUAL LUNCHEON brought together 700 colleagues, supporters, and friends to support its conservation and community initiatives on October 21, 2022, at the Palmer House Hilton. The event honored the contributions of Adele Simmons, an early and outspoken champion of nature as a solution to climate change. It celebrated the power of grassland ecosystems and raised over \$425,000 for Openlands' programs and initiatives.

Marshall Johnson, chief conservation officer for the National Audubon Society, gave the keynote address. Leading the strategic direction for hemispheric-wide conservation work at National Audubon Society, Marshall works to address the unprecedented climate change and biodiversity crises facing birds. In his compelling speech, he asked everyone to think of eating as an agricultural act. Underscoring that as we each make daily choices about the food we put on our plates, we all have a part to play in regenerative agriculture and transforming the food industry:

“We need big investment and big ideas, but it’s the little individual acts done daily that add up...The next time that you buy groceries, do me a favor—thank the labors of many who brought us this food. Let’s thank the animals and the plants for sharing their lifeform, and let’s thank the farmer who is going the extra mile to better care for their cattle and their soil, so that healthy grasslands, an indelible image of our prosperity, waves, and cool breeze, welcome home all those little brown birds.”

The program concluded with the honoring of Adele Simmons with the Conservation Leadership Award. From supporting the creation of the nation’s first metropolitan greenways and trails plan to championing early efforts that led to the establishment of America’s first National Tallgrass Prairie—Midewin, Adele’s lifelong leadership on climate issues is inspiring. She took the opportunity to encourage everyone to do all they could to mitigate increased temperatures:

“While the climate crisis is a global issue, I believe that our local actions have huge ripple effects across the world...As I was playing with my granddaughter last night, I kept thinking of the obligation all of us who are here today have to make sure that she can build a snowman when she grows up and that, in August, she will go outside to play instead of seeking shelter in an air-conditioned space. This is what Openlands is all about. I am deeply honored by today’s award.”

Thank you to all who supported the Openlands Annual Luncheon and its mission of conserving nature for life.

PICTURED (top to bottom): Marshall Johnson speaks from the podium, Co-Chairs James Alexander and Shaun Block give Adele Simmons (center) the Conservation Leadership Award; floral center pieces generously provided by Marion Parry; attendees enjoy Jerry Adelman’s remarks during the program. Students walk with a Bird in my Neighborhood volunteer on a field trip. Ms. Baeza and students wonder at the vegetable garden at Grissom Elementary.

CREDITS: Annual luncheon: Ashley Lane; Birds in My Neighborhood: Lucia Whalen; Ms. Baeza: Emily Reusswig.



Become an Openlander. Donate Today!

Creating opportunities for students, teachers, and schools to deepen their connection to the natural world takes imagination, collaboration, and YOU. Support Openlands today to nurture equitable and accessible nature-based education, ensuring all people live healthy, meaningful lives.

Visit openlands.org/donate to learn more.



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25 East Washington, Suite 1650
Chicago, Illinois 60602-1708
Telephone 312.863.6250
openlands.org

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