

## OVERTON PARK

# notes

spring 2020

## Celebrating the legacy of Memphis College of Art

When the lights go out in Rust Hall this spring, it will mean the end of an institution that has educated the creative community--graduating more than 2,600 students and teaching so many more--since 1936. But it won't mean the end of the work those artists created, which has left an indelible mark on Memphis and beyond.



Illustration by Iryna Kurylo, BFA in Design and Applied Arts, 2013

Here in Overton Park, which has housed the college since 1959, we'll miss the daily presence of students using the Greensward as their front yard, the forest as their inspiration, and the classrooms as their training ground. We've been fortunate to work with Memphis College of Art students on pedestrian safety campaigns, t-shirt designs, volunteer events, and public art projects like the Bike Gate arch.

As we say goodbye to an institution, we celebrate the people who brought it to life and who will carry its work forward. Although plans for identifying Rust Hall's new tenant have been put on hold during the COVID-19 pandemic, Overton Park Conservancy looks forward to welcoming a new anchor into the park family while honoring the legacy of MCA.

"MCA has drawn artists to Memphis from around the world--very many of whom have made Memphis

their permanent home," says MCA President Laura Hine. "I struggle to have an upbeat message about what the closure of MCA will mean to the Memphis community. MCA's closure is like the death of a beloved--inescapably there will be a tremendous and unfillable void in the cultural and artistic life of this community. I

think to convey anything to the contrary would be disingenuous, and not pay appropriate tribute to this beloved institution and all of its artists."

"It's impossible to capture in words the contributions to the visual arts that MCA has made for over 80 years, not only in the Memphis region, but around the world," Hine says. "The contributions can best be captured in the tremendous volume of art generated by MCA students and faculty--their art work is MCA's legacy. MCA's Legacy Catalogue highlights the work of many MCA artists and can be viewed at [www.memphiscollegeofart.com](http://www.memphiscollegeofart.com)."

Here, in their own words, are a few of MCA's alumni sharing their experiences with how the school shaped their careers and their lives. For more in-depth interviews, visit [www.overtonpark.org/category/mca](http://www.overtonpark.org/category/mca).

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## What does MCA mean to you?

**Grace Siler, BFA in Illustration, 2020:** MCA is like a second home to me. I love how many people around Memphis and out of state I have met through them. MCA was a place where I was really able to explore my interests and develop them. As a student, you had a lot of one on one time with professors and everyone knew each other's name. It was where I really discovered what



Grace Siler hopes to expand her online fashion accessory business into local shops and larger stores.

I enjoyed doing and made some amazing friendships.

**Tootsie Bell, BFA in Sculpture/Illustration, 1988:** MCA means the world to me. Coming from a small town where I didn't quite fit in and moving to a bigger city with the embracing creative community of MCA gave me direction and belonging. It basically saved my life. The care of the faculty and staff, the friends and community there, it's like one big family: a network of support and encouragement where creative minds flourish. There has never been, nor will there ever be a place like Memphis College of Art.

**Ren Whitticar, BFA in Illustration with a track in Comics, 2020:** I learned to open up and learned so much about myself during my four years here. My time here and the people I met is something I'll never forget and will forever cherish. I feel like I'm walking away from MCA a new person!

**Vanessa Gonzalez, BFA in Printmaking, 2015; MFA in Fine Arts, 2017:** Everything. It breaks my heart to know that MCA is closing! My mom always says that as soon as I walked in MCA during orientation I found myself. Not only did I meet my husband at MCA, I also had the privilege to learn from people I admire such as Leandra Urrutia, Eszter Sziksz, Tom Lee, and Maritza Davila. I truly discovered a whole different person/artist in myself. I owe everything to that school. I wouldn't change anything.

**Aaron Boyd, BFA, concentration in Sculpture/Metals, 2020:** MCA is the only place around the area where I could truly grow as an artist and learn from some of the greatest teachers uninhibited. It was a school where you went to become a better artist in general and one that more often than not had you produce amazing work that everyone was proud of. I can't thank the people there enough for helping everyone over the years with their dream of being a creator.



Aaron Boyd plans to use his post-graduation time honing his techniques and focusing on what sets his craft apart from others in the field.

**Mia Saine, BFA in Design Arts, 2017:** MCA was amazing, and it will always be the place that helped me discover myself as a creative and as a person. A whole new world was opened to me and I got to explore things I wouldn't have seen otherwise. All of the friendships and growth I have developed during my time at the institute are the things that drive me today. It just won't be the same without it.

## What was a memorable experience you had at MCA?

**Carl E. Moore, BFA in Painting/Illustration and Graphic Design, 1987; MFA in Art and Studio Practice, 2012:** I think the most memorable experience I had at MCA was working with some really honest and sincere instructors like Veda Reed, Maritza Davila, JD Kelly, Ellis Cappell, David Moses, and Bill Womack. I learned a lot from them, and for the 80s they made the school comfortable for everyone.

**Tootsie Bell:** I think my most memorable experience at MCA was going to Horn Island the first time. I've been 15 or so times and I always come home with something different. But the first time I went to Horn Island, it was like nothing I had ever experienced. You really have to dig deep out there...to weather the elements, to quiet the mind, to open your spirit. I grow every time I'm there. It is truly a magical place. That will be Bob Riseling's legacy, the great gift that he gave to every student that has been on that trip.

**Ren Whitticar:**

Critique days were my favorite, though this might be a shock to some because they were probably the most anxiety-filled days of class. I learned more about ways to improve my work and got to collaborate on different ideas with my classmates on how to make my work stronger. The bits of humor to break the tension during critique is something I'll always miss!



Ren Whitticar plans to work full-time as a freelance illustrator and is working on a book for beginning freelance artists.

**Vanessa Gonzalez:** My first year at MCA was so hard because I didn't really know what I was doing and I was so confused, but when I was introduced to printmaking my heart just fell in love. In that moment I knew the challenges I was going to face, but the smell and the sound of the ink when you apply it to the plate and the excitement of making an edition, carving every single line in my woodcuts--it was and still is amazing. But my graduations were my most memorable experiences. When I graduated with my BFA I felt like I overcame all of the challenges like not speaking a lot of English and not really having a huge art background. I discovered my inner artist. And when I graduated with my MFA I felt



Vanessa Gonzalez has shown work in national and international exhibitions, and was a finalist for the Latin American Contemporary Art exhibition in New York.

so achieved because I was the first girl in my family to graduate with a Master's and proud of myself because I was a full-time student with a full-time job.

**Aaron Boyd:** I had the chance to travel abroad this past summer and I chose to go to Japan due to heritage and my art. While there I got learn some basic bladesmithing techniques from a professional master Swordsmith, Taro Asano. And since I started back in August, I had been pushing for him to come here and give a lecture as well as a masterclass at the Metal Museum, which I was able to set up in February and have it go successfully.

**Mia Saine:**

A few of my peers and I had the wonderful opportunity to attend a very fun letterpress workshop, and I enjoyed every minute learning and practicing the process. My favorite part was mixing custom ink colors and then applying it to the letterpress evenly.



Mia Saine illustrated the Memphis Tourism Map Guide cover, showed work at the National Civil Rights Museum, and created last year's TEDxMemphis conference design, in addition to working with nonprofits like New Memphis Institute and Memphis River Parks Partnership.

This workshop led me to take the actual class that following spring. It helped me appreciate and understand modern design and color theory better. I hope I get the chance to do more letterpress in the future.

### ***Why did you decide to stay after the closure was announced?***

**Cambria Howard, BFA in Design Arts, 2020:** I was getting ready to deliver my daughter and pursue certification in another career in order to support her. After taking a semester off, I sat down and had a heartfelt conversation with my former mentor and professor, Kevin Mitchell. He knew that deep in my heart, I wanted to keep pursuing my degree. At that point, MCA had allowed me to create so many



Cambria Howard enjoys using graphic design to give an artistic voice to others who may lack the resources to speak for themselves. She hopes to pursue a career as an art director.

myself. I met so many people here that have impacted my life so much, including my professors. The amount of times I've had a one on one talk with my professors about my work or to just connect is something I wouldn't find anywhere else. (Thank you, Michele, Mary Ruth, and Big John for teaching me so much!)

## What will MCA's legacy be?

**Grace Siler:** I think it means we're part of Memphis's history. This school started in the James Lee House and then moved into Rust Hall, another really beautiful building. Both of those places have historical meaning to Memphis, and it's because MCA made them so. I think MCA will be remembered as a great art outlet with a unique connection to the community that not many other schools have.

**Aaron Boyd:** I think MCA's legacy will be about being THE school for some of the best creators to come out of. I want people to understand the community of artists that it helped produce here. Not many cities have a community of artists who more or less know each other and then work with each other after their graduation.

**Mia Saine:** MCA's legacy will be multidimensional because of all of the people who experienced it. It will be known and remembered as an important art pillar in Memphis that helped the community flourish with artists that would've never been present here today.

connections and skills that leaving felt like I was giving up on its vision and purpose for its students. So, I decided to stay and served as the bridge between students who had the same uncertainty that I had and administrators who were trying their best to keep the school open till its closure.

**Ren Whitticar:** Going to college, in general, was something I wanted to do for

**Carl E. Moore:** All the talented students, artists, designers, painters, sculptors, teachers etc. that the school launched out into the world. Everything they've created is part of the school's legacy.



Carl E. Moore is a painter and graphic designer whose work includes murals and experimental practice. He has also been a graphic designer for News Channel 3 for 24 years. He is shown here with Lee Hup (today an illustrator in Singapore) on MCA graduation day, May 1987.

**Vanessa Gonzalez:** It's the place where so many artists were discovered, where an all-nighter was more than sweat and tears—it was a sense of passion. Students were inspired, challenged, and pushed to their limits daily but the MCA culture made everyone feel a sense of purpose. It's more than just the school in the middle of Overton Park. It's the school that brought talent from all around the country, the school that will always be in Memphis's heart.

**Tootsie Bell:** For nearly 85 years, Memphis College of Art, formerly Memphis Academy of Art, has fed this city with great creative fuel. It has given birth to hundreds of artists that have gone on to touch other parts of the world and hundreds more that have stayed to shape the culture of Memphis as we know it.



Tootsie Bell is celebrating 25 years as proprietor of Tootsie Bell Silversmith/Jeweler. She exhibits regionally and has four public art pieces in Memphis, with plans to create more.

## A season of loss and legacy

As this issue celebrates the accomplishments of the students and alumni who have contributed to the Overton Park community, we must also acknowledge the deep pain of loss that many of us are feeling these days.

Reading the news during this pandemic, we know that some in our community are mourning the deaths of loved ones or have lost jobs and incomes. Our elected officials and healthcare systems are working around the clock to keep the worst of the crisis at bay. So the imminent closure of the venerable Memphis College of Art may not be top of mind for a lot of Memphians these days. But the arts community and the Overton Park community will feel it keenly when Rust Hall's doors close for good this spring.

Around what would have been the college's final graduation ceremony (now cancelled amid social distancing requirements), we are using these pages to lift up and celebrate the impact that these graduates, current and past, have had on Memphis and the world beyond. This effort prompted us to follow up with some of Overton Park Conservancy's own interns and fellows, to see what they've been up to as well. We couldn't be prouder to share some of their stories.

Reflecting on the loss of Memphis College of Art, I am reminded of how many times Overton Park, or a significant part of it, was nearly lost over the course of its 120-year history due to threats such as freeway expansion, stormwater detention plans, parking expansion, and even benign neglect. The next threat facing the park will likely be a financial one, as our economy dips and the park's community of donors shrinks.

For those who can, we ask that you consider supporting the park today so that Overton Park Conservancy can continue providing a free, safe, beautiful, and welcoming place for all Memphians. A gift of any amount counts you as a member of this park community, and signing up as a monthly donor (which you can do at [overtonpark.org/give](http://overtonpark.org/give)) is especially helpful now as we manage our budget through uncertain times.

Take a moment to imagine the Overton Park of ten years ago, and the Overton Park of today. The Overton Park of the future will depend on our community's support to keep the Conservancy alive.

tina's  
message

*Tina Sullivan*

### staff & board

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# Making it count in Overton Park

Watching the Poplar/Tucker entrance to Overton Park for eight years, our staff could confidently say that park usage peaks during the beautiful days of March. For the first time, we can quantify that observation with real data from the park.

With support from International Paper, the Plough Foundation, and Hyde Family Foundation, this winter the Conservancy installed seven mechanized visitor counters at various entrances to Overton Park. The two vehicle counters (at Poplar/Tucker and East Parkway) and five bike/pedestrian counters (at Poplar/Tucker, the Bike Gate arch, and the three Old Forest gateways) allow us to measure park usage over time.

It's no surprise that warm, sunny days show the highest number of visitors. But we've gathered some other interesting information, particularly on how the evolving threat of COVID-19 impacted park use.

## A Park and a Pandemic

Park use in 2020 peaked during Mayor Strickland's shelter-in-place order at all but one location.

With businesses across the city closed and Memphians searching for fresh air, visitors packed the park, forcing incremental shutdowns to dispel crowds. Here's a timeline of what the numbers show us:

**Thursday, March 19** - Overton Park Conservancy closes playgrounds, restrooms, and the dog park; Memphis Zoo closes to visitors.

**Thursday, March 26** - Peak usage day at East Parkway entrance (nearly 700 cars vs. a 237 daily average). Over 400 of these visitors crossed into the Old Forest on foot or by bike through the "Growth" gateway.

**Friday, March 27** - Mayor Strickland issues a message to park users: refrain from congregating in parks or they may have to be closed.

**Sunday, March 29** - Peak usage day at "Old Growth" gateway between Overton Bark and Rainbow Lake



A heat map of March 2020 visits to Overton Park shows the highest traffic at the Old Forest entrance near Overton Bark and Rainbow Lake Playground.

Playground. More than 2,300 pedestrians and cyclists were recorded passing through the gate on this day, nearly double the average weekend traffic for this gate.

**Tuesday, March 31** - Mayor Strickland closes the park to vehicle traffic.

Following the vehicle closure order, pedestrians and cyclists entering the Old Forest from the west dropped by 30%

and visitors entering from the east dropped by 45%. This reduced usage allowed the park to remain open rather than closing entirely.

## Missing Our Neighbors

The exception to peak usage in late March was the Poplar/Tucker vehicle counter, which saw its highest totals on the weekend of March 7. More than 2,500 cars entered the park here during that Saturday and Sunday, up from 2,100 the weekend before. These were both temperate, sunny weekends--the kind that we've always anecdotally called our peak days.

Compare those numbers to the weekend of March 28-29, after the Memphis Zoo and Brooks Museum had closed their doors. In similar weather conditions, only about 750 cars entered at the Poplar/Tucker entrance. That's still a high number under the circumstances of the pandemic, but it gives us a rare chance to see how much of the park traffic is going to cultural attractions vs. using the park recreationally.

While the spring of 2020 won't provide us with a "normal-year" baseline, it's been important for us to measure usage during a time when the park has provided some people with their only escape. Once life returns to normal, we plan to supplement the data with user surveys that tell us more about who's visiting the park, where they're coming from, and what areas they're visiting. We'll share the data with our park partners and colleagues at Shelby Farms Park Conservancy, Memphis River Parks Partnership, the Wolf River Conservancy, and the City of Memphis.

## Invasive plants? No match for volunteer Bill Bullock

After 35 years working at MLGW, Bill Bullock was ready to spend time giving back. Over the past three years, Overton Park has been the recipient of untold hours of Bill's time and energy--and the Old Forest is much better off for it.

Bill's journey to combating invasive plants in the park began with volunteer work in Kennedy Park, where he helped Wolf River Conservancy replant two electric transmission rights-of-way. Typically, in utility rights-of-way, crews spray herbicide or mow regularly to keep trees from growing up into power lines. But Bill learned that by planting clumping native grasses and interspersing native wildflowers, the project could save maintenance costs for the utility, create habitat, and provide a filter to reduce water runoff.

Bill brought his growing knowledge of native plants to Overton Park Conservancy in 2017, asking the staff to put him to work. He's long felt connected to the park through his mother, who spent her last few years at the Parkview and could often be seen with a backpack and binoculars, enjoying the birds in the forest.

Bill's commitment to forest stewardship was quickly obvious, and the Conservancy invested in training for him. With Director of Operations Eric Bridges and Operations Manager Andrew Weda, Bill attends an annual conference on invasive plant management. He's also become state-certified in the application of herbicide, so that "for the few times we need to use it, on things like larger shrubs that can't be pulled completely out of the ground, I know what I'm doing."

Fridays are designated invasive-removal days, and Bill often shows up with a small crew to help attack shrubby plants like nandina and bush honeysuckle.



Members of Girl Scout Troop 10336 worked with Bill to pull invasive plants in March.



Bill (third from left) with fellow Invasive Avengers Andrew Weda, Eric Bridges, and Collin Dice

This winter, Bill convened five volunteer work days, which recalled the privet pulls he'd been part of in the park years ago. "The Conservancy staff is small and weekends are precious. This year I felt like I had the knowledge to lead events on my own." He developed a strategy to focus on a specific area of the forest and remove multiple species, instead of fanning out and focusing on one plant. Over five weekends of nice weather and strong enthusiasm, crews started at East Parkway Pavilion and worked their way down the limestone loop in both directions, taking out as many invasive species as they could.

Working with Eric and Andrew has taught Bill a lot about the forest, and he's enjoyed being part of some of the many research efforts being conducted in the woods. "It's not just learning what plant is what. A lot of it is learning what's happening in the forest, what's changed, and what are the reasons for those changes. The learning curve is still pretty steep, but to me that's satisfying--to be able to continue to get better."

If Bill has taken one thing from his work at the park, it's that "it's a pretty rare thing to have a forest like this in the middle of a city. We've seen the impact on the forest of the development all around it, and of the non-native plants that grow so well and look so nice, but that have no natural enemies in our region. They get loose in the park and begin to change the character of our old-growth forest. Each of us can positively impact that environment by cultivating native plants and helping nature rebound."



Bill recommends Doug Tallamy's book *"Bringing Nature Home: How You Can Sustain Wildlife with Native Plants."*

## Checking in with Conservancy alumni

In the Conservancy's eight years of managing the park, we've been fortunate to work with some incredibly talented students. We love checking in with our past interns and fellows, and we asked them to share some of the exciting things they've been doing since their time at the Conservancy concluded.

### Jessica Smith, Volunteer Ranger, 2019



I'm working at Shelby Farms as a Ranger and pursuing a degree in Geography. As a ranger I do a multitude of tasks ranging from playground maintenance to guest interactions. In school I'm furthering my understanding of human geography and how it

community and more importantly our parks!

Working at the Conservancy was my first experience working in the park system and it was honestly magical. The passion I was exposed to helped fuel my love for our parks and strengthened my desire to create a positive impact in the system. Learning about our local forest also was a huge help in developing knowledgeable skills for the field.

The most memorable project I worked on was creating a game for Hollywood Feed's pup parade last October. It was really awesome being able to connect with our community and see how many people our local park impacts.

### Zoë Feder, Rhodes College Intern, 2019

I am the Development Coordinator at Western Resource Advocates (WRA) in Boulder, CO. WRA is an environmental policy and advocacy nonprofit that serves the Intermountain West region of the U.S. As Development Coordinator, I manage the donor database, process all gifts, and support operations for the fundraising team.

My internship at the Conservancy helped prepare me for my current position by showing me that a nonprofit works through collaboration and passion.

I hadn't been planning on pursuing a career at a nonprofit before. I also grew more comfortable speaking up in meetings, which has come in handy especially as the youngest person at WRA!

I helped put on a Field Day in the spring for the Conservancy and it was so fun! It was more of a low-key event where families came out to play. We had coordinated live music, food trucks, an auction, and games. Through the planning, I got to see the generosity and creativity within the community and Conservancy.



### Andrew Weda, University of Memphis/Nonprofit Leadership Alliance Intern, 2015-2016



I joined the staff as a Visitor Services Coordinator in 2016, and I'm now the Operations Manager. The two things that influenced my move to join the staff were the team—I enjoyed working with Tina,

who supervised my internship at the time--and working for an organization that conserves the environment and encourages people to make use of it.

Since joining the staff, I've worked a lot on removing invasive plants from the Old Forest. It is amazing how a small task such as pulling invasive species has a profound impact on other things such as native bird species, plants, and insects, among others.

During the period of time that the Conservancy was working to end parking on the Greensward, I learnt the importance of bringing all the stakeholders to the table and arriving at a solution that not only benefits the organizations involved but the whole community.



**Brooks Lamb, Rhodes College Bonner Scholar,  
2014-2017**



I'm pursuing my master's at Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies in New Haven, CT. My research focuses on the relationships that small farmers cultivate with the land. In particular, I'm interested in how certain virtues--particularly Wendell Berry's

concepts of affection and fidelity--motivate some farmers to become nurturing stewards, especially in rural communities that are being threatened and changed by sprawl and over-development. In several ways, the connections that farmers develop with their land are similar to the relationships that Memphians have nurtured with Overton Park. In both cases, love and respect sustain care and commitment. After finishing my graduate education--whether that ends with a master's or PhD--I hope to work for an organization focused on conservation and/or farming.

My time at the Conservancy was crucial for helping me recognize what I care about: understanding, promoting, and enhancing the relationships that people cultivate with land and place. Without the opportunities provided to me there, I may not have come to this discernment. The Conservancy also offered me direction--and hope--for my future vocation. While much of my academic work is solitary, I hope to become a member of a team after graduation that matches the qualities and character of the Conservancy's staff and volunteers--a caring, empathetic, and driven group that works together to serve both people and place and make lasting contributions to community.

The most memorable project I worked on was writing the book *Overton Park: A People's History*. When I first started interning as a second-year student at Rhodes, I was struck by the stories that volunteers from the community shared about the park. I learned from many Memphians what this place means to

people--and how much work it has taken to care for and protect the park over the years. Inspired by these stories, I decided to write a book that uses oral history to tell the story of Overton Park. Planning, researching, writing, and publishing the book took a lot of time and effort, but the work was well worth it. I'm just hopeful that the book is helping reveal the park's historic and contemporary importance and inspiring people to spend time in and care for the park. I'll also note that this book wouldn't have been possible without ever-present support and encouragement from Conservancy staff members (and many other people!).

Beyond the book, I also enjoyed working on the "Park Perks" membership incentive project and picking up trash in the Old Forest. There's just something so fulfilling about serving a place you love, even if it's by gathering garbage.

**Helen Hope, Rhodes College Urban Forestry Fellow,  
2016-2018**



I currently work at the Memphis River Parks Partnership, a nonprofit managing and catalyzing five miles of riverfront in downtown Memphis. My title is Program Associate, but I wear many different hats: designing

public programs, managing social communications, assisting with any environmentally-focused projects, even being a ranger during COVID-19 as a social distancing ambassador.

The Conservancy introduced me to the nonprofit world: presenting at board meetings, collaborating with local partners, and doing independent research projects. With an engaging and supportive mentor in Eric Bridges and all in an undergraduate setting, working with the Conservancy set me up well for post-grad opportunities, including the one I'm in currently.

I helped design and gather data for the Old Forest Regeneration research project through the Rhodes

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College and Conservancy-partnered Urban Forestry Fellowship. Gathering data meant going into the depths of the Old Forest to survey the trees (we looked back at the end of our summer and counted up how many times we said “pawpaw.” It was over 1,000!).

Often when we couldn’t identify a tree, we’d take a singular leaf back to arborist extraordinaire Eric Bridges at the office if he wasn’t in the field with us. I once at the very beginning brought him back a large poison ivy leaf without knowing! And that’s how I found out I wasn’t allergic to poison ivy.

**Adele Lemm, Communications Intern, Spring Hill College, Mobile, AL, 2017**



I’m a Marketing Associate with Regency Homebuilders in Memphis, designing marketing materials, social media and website management and strategy, as well as copy-writing.

During my communications and graphic design internship, the Conservancy was launching a campaign to raise awareness

and funds for the Greensward. I was able to explore my skills as a young designer at the time and work on campaign posters and other marketing materials. The most memorable project I worked on was a thank-you postcard I designed for the Conservancy to send out to donors after the fundraiser. The postcard featured every name of the 1,000+ donors we received --arranged to depict the Greensward itself. I am most proud of that project, not because of its positive response, but because it visually showed just how many people came together to support such a special and beloved piece of Memphis.

The opportunity to represent my favorite park, work on a critical campaign, and participate in strategy meetings provided me not only with invaluable hands-on experience but also with a better idea of what direction I wanted to take my career in. Working for a cause I felt so strongly for, my internship prepared me to work passionately and professionally for other causes that I care deeply about. Three years later, I am still able to reflect and apply lessons that I have learned from Overton Park Conservancy to my career.

**Catherine Miller, Rhodes College Urban Forestry Fellow, 2014-2015**

I’m an Environmental Compliance and Sustainability Coordinator at Dallas Love Field Airport. My team and I ensure that our facilities abide by local, state, and federal environmental regulations. I also help plan and implement sustainability initiatives. I’m working on a few exciting projects including a Waste Diversion Program and a Carbon Management Plan with the aim of reducing the airport’s greenhouse gas emissions.

My experience at the Conservancy taught me the value of community engagement. Conservation is not just about preserving natural resources, but also listening to people and understanding how they interact with the environment. The Conservancy maintains such a vital ecological and cultural treasure by taking community members’ needs and wants into consideration. I heard many stories about the park’s impact on people’s lives. So now when I plan sustainability projects, I do my best to listen to stakeholders and figure out how we can meet our environmental goals while addressing their needs.

During my sophomore year, I asked Tina Sullivan to speak on a panel about environmental careers. She was incredibly gracious and gave my fellow students some much-needed encouragement, advice, and perspective. So I was honored when I had the opportunity to serve as an Urban Forestry Fellow during my junior year, where I worked to collect tree health and composition data in the Old Forest. It really brought my ecology and environmental chemistry classes to life! Eric Bridges, my fellowship mentor, was a wealth of knowledge and taught me a lot about tree identification. While I enjoyed working in the Old Forest, the thing I remember most is the people who supported me along the way. They are what make the Conservancy so special.



## City snakes: copperheads in Overton Park

*Malle Carrasco-Harris recently completed her PhD in Biology at the University of Memphis. Here, she shares the results of her multi-year study of copperheads in the Old Forest.*

My research story began when I was a new Biology teacher to high school freshmen. I needed a place to run away from lesson plans, and the Old Forest trails provided that refuge. During those excursions, I asked myself “What effect am I having on the animals living here?” and “How do animals adapt to urbanizing environments?” I had research experience in the remote Rocky Mountains, but I was unfamiliar with doing field research in a city.

Urban science is more relevant than ever, as over half of the global population lives in urban areas. The consequences of urbanization are far ranging, from exotic species introduction to habitat loss and fragmentation. Animals have to adapt to our novel environments to survive.

The most commonly studied urban animals are mammals and birds. We know less about reptiles, which may be particularly sensitive to habitat changes. Reptiles are ectothermic (“cold-blooded”) and need safe areas to bask and control their body temperature. Roads and railways may mean life or death for slower-moving species. Further, human persecution of these misunderstood animals (particularly snakes) leads to intentional population reduction.

Natural areas like the Old Forest are absolutely essential for wildlife. However, urban natural areas may still differ from undisturbed habitats, whether that’s because of introduced non-native species, trail use, urban borders, or modified water resources.

For my dissertation, I studied copperheads in Overton Park. Copperheads are a great study species because they’re common throughout their range (although that doesn’t mean easy to find!), they overlap with many other reptiles that are at greater conservation risk, and they can survive in close proximity to humans.

**How do copperheads in Overton Park differ from those in rural areas?** I captured snakes in Overton and at Meeman Biological Station and found



Overton snakes were smaller, possibly because of differences in diet, growth rate, genetics, or population demographics. By implanting and tracking snakes with radio transmitters, I found Overton snakes had smaller home ranges and moved less than rural copperheads, not for lack of space. Possible explanations include denser food availability, fewer predators and competing species, human disturbance, or a combination of circumstances.

### **Are there differences in snake movement in relation to trails?**

I found that snakes were not altering how much they move

in a day by how far they are from the trail. Perhaps this population is adapted to life by trails. However, snakes that lived further from paths usually had larger home ranges, implying that there may be some effect. Cryptic behavior and camouflage make copperheads easy to miss, making them generally less threatening to park users.

**What are important habitat features for Overton copperheads?** Like previous studies, I found canopy and the proximity and number of logs in an area were key. These allow snakes to find a warm and safe place to bask. However, my modeling suggested those few things were not the whole story. Overton has unique qualities, such as dense native and non-native plant species that may alter how snakes use this space compared to undisturbed environments.

**What is the genetic health of the population?** We found Overton copperheads had less genetic diversity than the rural snakes. This means that they may be slightly more vulnerable in the future if they don’t have the genetic diversity to adapt, a common issue with isolated populations. We thought copperheads may be inbreeding, but we did not see genetic evidence of this, meaning the population is currently large enough for individuals to mate with unrelated snakes.

Urban natural areas like Overton Park are gems. My research suggests Overton copperheads are adaptive and resilient to some human disturbance. In a world that’s quickly changing, this is encouraging. It means natural areas provide good habitat for a diversity of plants and animals to have healthy populations, which is all the more reason to protect them.

Overton Park Conservancy gratefully acknowledges the individuals and organizations who made donations and in-kind (noted with italics) gifts from January 1, 2019 to December 31, 2019. If we have inadvertently omitted the name of one of our supporters, we sincerely apologize.

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## Need some #NatureZen?



We know that many of you haven't been able to visit Overton Park this spring as much as you're used to. That's why we're bringing the beauty of the Old Forest to you via our weekly email series. Inspired by the popular hashtag #NatureZen, our staff is filling your inbox with photos and reflections on the many plants, animals, and even fungi that call the park home.

Sign up to get your weekly #NatureZen dispatch by visiting [www.overtonpark.org/email](http://www.overtonpark.org/email).



# VERTON PARK CONSERVANCY

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## Back when we could gather together...

We want to thank our partners and sponsors for making the weekend of March 6 a memorable one in the park. We look forward to the days when people can once again come together for conservation, recreation, and togetherness at the park.



The Conservancy was honored to host the City's Arbor Day Celebration this year. Pictured planting a new tree are Memphis Tree Board President Dr. Mark Follis, City Councilman Worth Morgan, Memphis City Beautiful Commissioner Emily Adams Keplinger, West Tennessee Urban Forestry Council Volunteer Coordinator Jan Castillo, Overton Park Conservancy Executive Director Tina Sullivan, Tennessee Division of Urban Forestry Regional Forester Ryan J. Morris, Memphis City Beautiful Executive Director Eldra White, and City of Memphis Division of Parks & Neighborhoods Interim Director Nick Walker.

The next day, the Greensward welcomed pups of all sizes and wardrobes for our first-ever Mardi Growl event. Presented by Hollywood Feed, the day featured a costume contest (with grand prize by The Second Line), pup parade, and crawfish boil by Local Gastropub. Atlas the papillon took home the top prize for dressing as Robin Hood. We hope to be back in the fall with another event for our furry friends!