



July 2015 Sustainability Hero Donna Kirkland, Co-Chair, Environmental Commission, City of Newark

Donna Kirkland has spent the last ten years working on the greening of Newark. She is forging a new kind of urban environmentalism by strengthening and empowering communities through park revival. Donna is the co-chair of the Newark Environmental Commission and is proud to announce that Newark has just submitted its application for Sustainable Jersey certification.

Donna is known as the community connector. She listens to people's needs and then finds or knows the resources and people that can help. She has a truly extraordinary knack for making friends but shies away from public speaking, preferring to relate to people one on one.

Proud of her flip phone and avoidance of social media, Donna maintains an e-list that is famous in Newark; it includes individuals, businesses, schools, organizations and agencies. She sends out regular community updates and is told that her email updates can fill a workshop room with participants, connect people to jobs, apartments and resources, and more.

Growing Up In Newark

Located in Essex County, Newark is New Jersey's largest and second-most racially diverse city. Donna's parents, Jodell and Willie Ed Kirkland, moved to Newark in 1948 from Dothan, Alabama. The third born of seven children, Donna grew up in Newark. She remembers that even with exhausting family responsibilities, her parents always opened the door to those in need. The art of giving and opening one's heart is definitely a quality that was passed on to Donna.

Excelling in design, Donna graduated from Newark's Vocational High School and worked in retail stores including Bamberger's Department Store in Newark, Stretch and Sew and Suki's in Millburn. After a change in management, Donna was unemployed. Unable to find a new job, she did volunteer work at the local elementary school with children at risk. In her free time she did crafts and made her own hand-made jewelry.

Community Meetings Can Change Your Life

Donna's friend asked her to attend a community meeting for Nat Turner Park. This park was next to her home in Newark's Central Ward and was basically a nine-acre lot that had been vacant for thirty years. Donna was reluctant to go, but attended and spoke up about her ideas for incorporating art in the park through mosaics and wrought iron elements.

The meeting facilitators asked Donna to lead the art committee which she did, and did well. Through her volunteering on this project, the leadership at the [Trust for Public Land](#) asked Donna to apply for an internship and then hired her as the outreach coordinator. She is now the senior program coordinator of Parks for the People-Newark and has been working for this organization for the last nine years. The Trust for Public Land has completed thirteen park projects including Nat Turner Park which was dedicated in July 2009. Nat Turner Park is Newark's largest city-owned park. It now provides recreational space for a neighborhood of approximately 19,000 people, including 7,000 children.

"I would have never imagined this would be my life's work, but I feel lucky to do the work I do," said Donna. The Trust for Public Land is a national organization that helps communities raise funds, conduct research and planning, acquire and protect land, and design and renovate parks, playgrounds, trails, and gardens. Scott



Dvorak, director of the Trust for Public Land office in Newark, describes Donna as “spiritual in the broadest sense of the word. She is our connector and loves putting people and ideas and concepts together for good. She will come in the office and announce that she has had a dream and it’s time to put the dream into action. We follow her lead and are inspired by her spirit.”

Sustainable Jersey Certification and Task Forces

Donna was invited to a retreat on the topic of food security at the Center for Whole Communities held at Knoll Farms in Vermont. A group of 25 leaders from New Jersey spent a week discussing land preservation, food systems and what an urban agriculture future would look like. As a result of this retreat, Donna returned to New Jersey and joined the Sustainable Jersey Food Task Force and the Arts and Culture Task Force. She also got to work to make sure that Newark became certified with Sustainable Jersey. In her role as a member of the Newark Environmental Commission, she was part of the team that helped submit a certification application last month. Moving forward, the group is planning many new initiatives including an effort to pass a cumulative impacts sustainability ordinance for Newark. The Ironbound Community Corporation is leading this work.

Idle-Free Newark

Donna was also involved in the launch of the “Idle-Free Newark” campaign to reduce automobile idling. On Earth day, Newark unveiled its first “No Idling” sign, and the City has resumed enforcing its three-minute idling law, on the books since 1986, to crack down on motorists who leave their vehicles running. Idling near schools is especially problematic because children breathe up to 50 percent more air per pound of body weight than adults. Newark has a disproportionate asthma rate of 25 percent, compared to the statewide average of 12 percent. In partnership with community groups, the Newark Environmental Commission is working to inform Newark residents and commercial truck and bus drivers about the benefits of creating an Idle-Free Newark.

Newark Sustainability Action Plan

The Environmental Commission was lucky to have a Sustainability Action Plan to help direct and organize its work. The Newark Sustainability Action Plan’s vision is to make Newark a “healthy, vibrant, and sustainable city.”

The Newark Sustainability Office developed the plan with input from residents and organizational leaders. The final Plan was drafted by Newark Sustainability Director Stephanie Greenwood, with extensive support from Environmental Commissioners and Sustainability Office staff.



The plan articulates a policy framework of four goals: (1) improved public health, 2) cost savings, 3) enhanced quality of life and 4) expanded green economic opportunity. It also identifies several priority action items regarding air quality, energy, recycling and materials management, stormwater management and community greening, greenhouse gas emissions and healthy food access.

Parks for the People – Participatory Design Process

In Donna’s work with the Trust for Public Land-Parks for People program, she is helping to create a citywide network of parks and playgrounds. The goal is to provide all city residents access to functional, well-maintained outdoor recreational space within a 10-minute walk from home.

The urban parks program reinforces the connection between Newark residents and their community through a variety of projects such as Newark Riverfront Park, Jesse Allen Park and Sussex Avenue Elementary School. Donna assists with community engagement efforts, participatory design and growing partnerships with local organizations to establish long-term stewardship. The Parks for People program has created twelve new green parks and playgrounds in Newark.

The challenge is to confront the barriers that prevent people from having a sense of ownership in a park. Donna said, "Neighbors' participation in park design and development is important and community involvement doesn't stop when construction is complete. It's my job to put myself out of a job and to let the community sustain the project."



She does this by establishing and supporting volunteer "friends of the park" groups. The Trust for Public Land supports volunteer groups at Nat Turner Park, Jesse Allen Park, Mildred Helms Park, Quitman Street School, Mount Vernon Street School, Peace Park, McKinley Street School, Louise A. Spencer School, and Sussex Avenue School. As a result of Donna's organizing and coordination efforts, the volunteer groups founded United Parks as One, a network of Newark "friends" groups that shares best practices for community park support.

Newark Summer Park Rangers Program

Donna is proud of the Newark Park Rangers program that is offered to high school students for six weeks in the summer. Student youth crews are involved in the daily clean-up of the parks in addition to participating in yoga classes, journaling and other educational activities. Summer ranger, Shakilah, said she enjoyed learning about the environment. "You get to interact with other things," she said. "And you get to understand nature and what's in the world beyond yourself." The students also take field trips such as visiting the Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, a local garden to pick zucchinis, and meeting with a local businessman to learn about the importance of acquiring the skills needed to do the work they enjoy.

Thankful for Moments of Quiet

Donna says she is a spiritual person striving for an open heart and mind. She is a caregiver; she currently takes care of her mother who has Alzheimer's. She is thankful to her son Lamonte, granddaughter Fasuedjah, her soul mate Omar and her siblings: Brenda, Bruce, Annissa, William, Kevin and Bryan for their support while doing this work.



When asked about what she likes to do in her free time, she said, "Overall, I like to be still and listen to myself. There is a lot to learn from being still."