

Invigorating neighborhoods, inspiring change.

By Samantha White

My husband, Byron, and I have lived in our home on the East Side of Buffalo since 2005. We started with a grassy lot and some trumpet lilies in front. My mom, Elaine Bergman, would send me iris, Rose of Sharon, and forsythia from my childhood home on Long Island through the mail.

And my garden grew. I became a gardener on the 2019 East Side Garden Walk (ESGW), an annual free self-guided garden tour supported by Gardens Buffalo Niagara (GBN) held on the third Saturday of July. I saw it as a way for us to contribute to the narrative of our own community and we were able to help create a positive story about our neighborhood on the news. The day of the walk, Byron and I spoke face to face with visitors from inside and outside of our community. We shared our garden, our love of community, and our story of his father rehabbing the property in the 80's, our move to the house and my mom's long-distance garden contributions. We also squashed a few stereotypes that day.

After helping to get The Olmsted Conservancy to open the MLK Park Greenhouse to the public for the first time in its history in 2019, I was drafted to Co-Chair ESGW. Since becoming a Co-chair and GBN Board Member, we have worked hard to build event hoping to replicate the success of Garden Walk Buffalo, another GBN event, which has a \$5 million impact on its community. We have proudly grown the resident participation from about 20 gardens in 2018 to almost 75 gardens for this year. We have advocated for beautifying the East Side and GBN supported that work by giving out beautification microgrants.

Since 2018, our group has been pushing for the repair of the dilapidated streetscape in front of the Freedom Wall, a mural which pays tribute to national and local African American leaders. I began leading those ESGW efforts in 2019, and by 2020 we had partnered with the Michigan Street African American Heritage Corridor Commission. Our joint efforts resulted in a New York State grant for \$366,000, secured by State Senator Tim Kennedy, to create a more dignified Freedom Wall experience by replacing the sidewalks and upgrading the streetscape. We have completed 6 months of community input and are now at the design panel stage of the process. The project has a 2022 estimated completion date.

For more information about the ESGW please go to EastSideGardenWalk.com. And if you would like one last chance to catch some East Side gardening this year check out GBN's Urban Farm Day Tour on August 28, 2021 from 10am-3pm UrbanFarmDay.com.

Samantha White is a Staff Attorney, Legal Aid Bureau of Buffalo, a member of Temple Beth Zion and has recently become involved with Buffalo's Jewish Community Relations Council.