

GREEN STEWARDS in the BRONX

By Ariane Conrad

Amilcar Laboy, James Wells, and Dwaine Lee are graduates of the Bronx Environmental Stewardship Training program administered by Sustainable South Bronx.

Majora Carter says of the program: “Nearly all BEST students were on public assistance, and about half have prison records. They range in age from about 18 to 45, and learn landscaping, green-roof installation and brownfield remediation. After 4 years, 85% of our graduates have good, steady jobs.”

Amilcar, James and Dwaine now hold full-time jobs with Sustainable South Bronx itself (although most of the training program’s graduates find jobs outside the organization.) Amilcar and James are Greenway Stewards, while Dwaine serves as the B.E.S.T./Greenway Steward Field Manager.

AMILCAR LABOY, Bronx NY

Born in Puerto Rico and raised in the South Bronx, Amilcar Laboy has firsthand experience with the brutality of our penal system.

“I learned that crime does not pay, at all” he says, drifting off for a moment into memories, “...and I believe that I paid too much for mine.” Now 44 years old, Amilcar was incarcerated from 1991-1998 for armed robbery. He says he never went back to crime after that and he never will.

After getting out, he worked in a warehouse for two years before being promoted to a truck driver. But “then things went downhill, for the company and for me, and I was laid off. I got down to my very last unemployment checks.” His girlfriend knew about Sustainable South Bronx’s Ecological Stewardship Training—the BEST program—because her daughter had done it and had gotten a good job as a manager with the Bronx River Alliance. She recommended that Amilcar try it.

Amilcar graduated from BEST in Fall 2007, and landed a job as one of the Greenway Stewards for Sustainable South Bronx. “I cultivate, prune and water the trees in the Greenway and the plantings along the avenue. I aerate the soil there, remove garbage from around the trees, remove weeds, and do transplanting. I also do green roofs installation, and maintenance, which involves weeding, sweeping, and checking for leaks.”

It was a big change from driving a truck, and at first he found it less appealing. But now he takes pride in the work, especially his pruning: “I like deciding the design of the tree, eliminating some growth so it doesn’t become chaos later on.” In fact, Sustainable South Bronx is sending him to a class called “Perceptual Pruning” at the Botanical Gardens on Saturdays to deepen his skills and expertise.

He also likes that he's helping his own community, improving the quality of the air and educating his neighbors about the environment.

"They are listening! The community is starting to get it," he says. "They're throwing less garbage right on the ground, and sometimes they volunteer for garbage removal. It's cleaner now."

And it's not just cleaner, it's safer too. "On one street the tree limbs were so low it blocked street lights and gave shelter to criminal activity, so we pruned it as aggressively as that species and age of the tree could handle. Now the light is on that corner. We got a lot of phone calls from community members thanking us for that work, and by next year the canopy will fill out better too." Context sensitive tree pruning led these stewards to take a different approach in front of a senior center. "We built tree-guards with benches for the elderly to sit out on the sidewalk, and kept the branches low so they'd have shade. That gets them outside more, and keeps eyes on the streets which is safer for everyone."

JAMES WELLS, Bronx NY

James Wells remembers the exact date he graduated from Sustainable South Bronx's Ecological Stewardship Training (B.E.S.T.)—November 10, 2006—and the day he landed the job as one of their Greenway Stewards—April 16, 2007.

"This is the longest I've ever held a job," he says with pride. "I mean, I was a kid when I went in." James was just 18 when he went to jail for armed robbery, and he spent the next ten years of his young life behind bars. After more than one Re-Entry Job Program, he was frustrated at the poor reception he received from potential employers.

Then he heard about the B.E.S.T. program and the chance to get a so-called green-collar job. He knew it was what he wanted to do.

Together with fellow Greenway Steward Amilcar, James tends to the trees and plants and installs green roofs. James particularly enjoys the artistry involved in pruning ("it's like being a barber"), and interacting with people in doing outreach to the community. "We educate them about how we can improve air quality and water quality by planting and maintaining trees. Also about how the trees will reduce the Hunts Point neighborhood's rates of asthma."

It's not just a nine to five pursuit for him. Even when he's off he finds himself talking about the work: "It's like we're fighting a battle, counteracting polluters," he says. "We've got to face the consequences for what we've done and race to counteract what we've done, as a human society."

"And It's not just transforming the environment, it's also transforming attitudes. If they see someone cares, it gives them hope, and now they care, and change their behavior. When we first came around there was a lot of trash and debris, but now residents and business owners assist us. That's the best part."

“Being able to transform this community that’s in a degenerate state, to be regenerating it... It’s not just transforming the environment, it’s also transforming the minds and the attitudes of the people. If they see that someone cares, it gives them hope, and now they care, and they change their behavior. When we first came around there was a lot of trash and debris, and now we’re having to do less and less garbage removal. The residents and the business owners are assisting us. That’s the best part.”

It’s more than a job in a personal way, too. “The relationships at SSB are something special. It’s not like a job where you just clock in, and people really don’t want to be there. SSB feels like more of a family. Supervisors are flexible and understanding. When you need them, they’re there for you; when they need you, you’re there for them. I’ve never thought I would have that type of relationship with co-workers and supervisors.”

James’ dream for his future is to become a supervisor of green roof installations, continuing “to cultivate three types of green: one green is greening the ghetto, like planting trees and installing the green roofs; the second is creating green-collar jobs; and that gives rise to the third kind of green, which is creating currency for poor people like myself who are discriminated against because of prior history, skin color, or their education.”

DWAINE LEE, Bronx NY

Dwaine is an avid reader and a huge fan of science-fiction author Octavia Butler, one of the rare African-American writers working in the genre, and the first sci-fi writer ever to win a MacArthur Foundation “Genius” Grant.

That’s why his ears perked up when he learned there was “a lady in Brooklyn who had won one because of her work for the environment.” That “green lady,” of course, was Majora Carter, founder of Sustainable South Bronx.

“I had no college degree, and child support payments to make, so I was working two or three jobs to make ends meet—in hospitality, hotels, or physical work as landscaper or a furniture mover. I didn’t have a bank account or a credit card —like a ghost in society. I didn’t have the luxury of volunteering in the environmental field to learn about it.”

When Dwaine found out about B.E.S.T. he “couldn’t believe they would train me and help place me in this new field for free! All they asked for was motivation and ambition and to work hard—and that’s what I do anyway. It was a blessing.”

He gave notice to the moving company where he was the foreman in order to make time for the training. That meant that during the 12 weeks of B.E.S.T. (unpaid, except for Carhart pants and jacket, Timberland boots, tools, a lunch stipend, and a public transportation pass), he’d do the program for eight hours a day, and then in the evenings he would run over to the hotel, where he worked evenings and sometimes the overnight shift.

“It was bananas,” says Dwaine, but he had zero regrets about the investment.

“I learned a wealth of basic concepts, like that a tree is a kind of living mechanism for environmental remediation, one that needs inputs and maintenance as well. And I learned how you do that: by aerating the soil, for example, and pruning properly... I learned about the ramifications of pesticides if you have to resort to using them, and how to apply them safely. And I became aware that not every plant you see out here is going to necessarily help your environment: that some of them are invasive, and are causing more problems than they’re solving.

“We also spent a week in a classroom learning how to conduct ourselves safely and responsibly in a hazardous site or around toxins, learning how to put on scuba gear or a hazmat suit.”

At the close of the training, every graduate is given a \$600 “transitional stipend,” to be used on whatever they need to get ready for a job in the field. “They helped a lot with my resume, which has always been hard for me to write, even though I have a lot of work experiences,” Dwaine says. And then he was off to job interviews, some of which came from his own leads, and some of which SSB drummed up.

Annette Williams, Director of the BEST program takes pride in all of her students: “they are like my own children and I stay connected long after they graduate.” But she also takes pride in how the program developed. “We haven’t relied on government support at BEST, and it shows. We developed market based approaches that take into account the skills in demand, and we ask employers what they need and how our graduates are performing. They learn that we are responsive to their needs, so they become responsive to ours. The program has changed since 2003 as a result, and as the market evolves, so will we.”

Dwaine landed the position of B.E.S.T./Greenway Steward Field Manager at SSB. He has a variety of responsibilities. As the B.E.S.T. Field Manager, he accompanies the 15-25 participants during the three trainings each year. “I am their point person and a mentor to them. Sometimes I have to encourage them to hold on, because it can be hard to see the future possibilities when you’re doing work that looks like simple manual labor. Part of “environmental remediation” is rubbish removal, like jumping into the Bronx River and pulling out a rusty bicycle. But as the training continues and students see how their place in the bigger picture will help save the planet and themselves, my job gets a lot easier.

“Although I am blessed to not have spent time in jail, I can relate to the cats who have served time; just living in poverty in this state, in this country, is a kind of a prison for your mind, and your aspirations. For your spirit. It’s very degrading. But then, taking a barren tar roof and turning it into a green space that will live for decades cleaning the air and water and reducing energy consumption is really powerful. It’s like creating new land, a promised land if you know what I mean.”

Dwaine looks forward to launching an agriculture-based venture—maybe an urban farm in New York, or a coffee cooperative in Jamaica.

“It is amazing being around SSB and seeing that my people are at the forefront of doing something like this in our own neighborhoods. Before we start coalition building and working with others, we have to take personal responsibility for the environment around us, in order to initiate any kind of change. The answers to the problems that we face are ourselves: we are our own answers.”