



Doreen Abubakar stands beside the sign for the public fishing dock at Beaver Ponds Park that the organization she founded, CPEN, helped build. Photo: Judy Benson

She's a force of nature and community in her hometown of New Haven

By Judy Benson

Doreen Abubakar is building a legacy of connections in her native city of New Haven.

In her tireless organizing and leadership of educational events and projects to enhance urban outdoor spaces, she's connecting people to the environment, and people to people through the environment. People she works with say she's "amazing," "really committed," and has "more energy and ideas than anyone." She describes herself as an urban environmentalist, a social entrepreneur and a science educator.

"I graduated in 1981 from an alternative high school, the High School in the Community," she recalled. "Many of the

teachers there were hikers and kayakers. With them I learned to canoe and hiked the Appalachian Trail. I realized that if this is a 'wow' for me, it'll be a 'wow' for other people, so it became a lifelong quest to try to get minority communities engaged in the environment.

"I'm not doing this for me," she continued. "I believe there are nurturing and mental health benefits and a comfort you can get if you understand the systems of nature. It all starts with giving people that experience, inviting them in a way that is inclusive."

Geordie Elkins, executive director of Highstead, a regional conservation and ecological stewardship nonprofit group



based in Redding, spoke about one of the first activities he and his organization worked on with her. It was an “All Things Pollinator” event at a reclaimed brownfield site in the Newhallville neighborhood, one of the city’s poorest. As part of the event, he and others from Highstead worked alongside neighborhood youth and adults to build a greenhouse to grow native plants for the community.

Shortly after he and others arrived at 10 a.m. on a Saturday, Abubakar called the group together for a pancake breakfast. Elkins was eager to start work on the greenhouse, so he didn’t understand why she wanted to interrupt them so soon.

“Then I realized that her objective was not just to get the greenhouse built, but also building the community and the relationships,” he said. “Stopping us to eat pancakes was her way. She set up a tent there and cooked pancakes, and we all had pancakes and syrup right next to the construction site.”

Abubakar has been on this mission in her hometown for more than two decades, after raising five children and working as a 4-H environmental educator in New York. She’s done it mainly through the non-profits she founded, CPEN (Community Placemaking Engagement Network,) and the West River Watershed Partnership, in collaboration with other community groups.

Consider just a few of the highlights on this one-woman dynamo’s resume as an urban environmentalist: the 13-year-old annual West River Water Festival; canoe lessons for New Haven youth; transformation of the blighted lot in Newhallville into an urban garden, apiary, event space and outdoor classroom for craft projects, urban gardening classes, bicycle repair and fostering youth entrepreneurs. Then there’s drug prevention and literacy programs, park clean-ups and projects that built floating docks for fishing at waterways accessible to city residents; fishing education events; and the Conservation Work Crew that has employed New Haven teens and young adults in cleaning up a neglected city park and teaching other youth about fishing and environmental science. How does she do it all?

“My mother was a community worker,” she said, “so I always went with her on her projects. That’s how I learned I could juggle things.

“I remember one time she wanted to buy a bus for our church for youth field trips,” she continued. “So we started collecting bottles and cans and she was able to buy the bus. I learned that instead of waiting for handouts, we can put our minds together and find ways to bring in the money we need.”

In 2022, she received a Lifetime Achievement Award for Environmental Leadership from the Greenwich Audubon Society.



Top, student workers and volunteers plant seedlings; work in the greenhouse (middle); and enjoy a pizza lunch together at the Learning Corridor garden last summer. Photos: Georgie Elkins



The Learning Corridor garden and community space was created out of an abandoned corner lot once known as the 'mud hole' in the Newhallville section of New Haven. Photo: Georgie Elkins

"Doreen combines her passion for native plant gardening with community development and youth empowerment in powerful ways," the organization said in announcing the award. "Doreen is a true visionary who has created a powerful and unique urban development model."

On a chilly February morning in the Manjares restaurant on West Rock Avenue, Abubakar gave an overview of her work over a cup of coffee. She started with her core motivation—transforming urban areas and building connections to nature—then touched on the many events and projects she's initiated over the years. But she wasn't content to sit for long. She wanted to go to some of the places she's impacted.

The first stop was Beaver Pond Park, recently improved with a fishing dock and native plantings thanks in large part to the work of Abubakar and CPEN. Next came the formerly blighted public lot in Newhallville, about a mile and half away. Abubakar had begun her work in the neighborhood where she lives near the West River, then realized Newhallville was a neglected area in need of attention. She recalled the day she

first visited the empty, trash-strewn lot straddling an intersection and crossed by the Farmington Canal Trail, popular with cyclists, runners and walkers. Local residents had dubbed the lot the "mud hole," but Abubakar imagined it becoming a community asset.

"I had a vision," she said.

CPEN secured a grant that enabled the city to install benches, an outdoor gym, a water fountain and a pollinator garden on one side, and across the street an urban garden, greenhouse and event space. A sign at one end designates it as the "Learning Corridor."

Dennis Riordan is president of the Menunkatuck Audubon Society. Its 750 members come mostly from the suburban towns from Madison to the Naugatuck River Valley, but the group wanted to become more involved in the city.

"Twelve years ago she invited us to table at the West River Watershed Festival, and I said, 'why not?'" he said. "Since then we've been working on several projects with her, including a native plant nursery and native plant sale at the Newhallville

site. She got some of the local kids to work with us. She's really committed to people in the neighborhood and making things better for them."

The native plant nursery has raised 150 different species and has thus far sold more than 4,000 plants to schools, land trusts, Audubon groups and individuals from as far as Providence, Riordan said. The plants sell for \$12 to \$25 each, bringing in a steady source of income to keep the project going. This winter, Riordan was already looking forward to being back at the Newhallville lot working with neighborhood youth to start new plants for the spring and summer sales.

"I remember working with one young man," Riordan said. "He was 14 years old and had never done anything like this before."

When he first started, Riordan said, the youth was difficult to work with, unenthused about plants and gardening. But after a few weeks, he changed.



“Now he’s one of the best workers,” Riordan said. “He sees things that need to be done and he does them. He put in a new garden on his own. It’s very rewarding to see that.”

Abubakar said she finds great joy in shepherding youth into positive outlets. In an age when cell phones, TikTok and other technology consume so much of their attention, she believes they have a huge need to be connected to their neighborhoods and other people through experiential, tangible actions.

“It is very satisfying to be able to say to then, ‘Look. You kids built that,’” she said.

This winter, Abubakar was gearing up for a busy spring and summer. Last August, CPEN received a \$250,000 grant from the state Department of Agriculture to purchase a cargo container to house a hydroponic garden to grow food year-round. The container will be parked at Booker T. Washington Academy Middle School in Hamden and an educator hired to work with students to raise leafy greens that will be served in the school cafeteria and sold to local residents.

Some of the greens will be offered for sale at a new farmer’s market set to open in June at the Learning Corridor. A \$3,300 city grant is funding market startup costs. Abubakar also wants to start hydroponic gardening there.

“There’s no economic development in Newhallville, and this is a food dessert,” she said.



CPEN employees doing cleanup on March 15 in preparation for the spring planting at the Learning Corridor garden on Hazel Street in New Haven. Photo: Judy Benson



Doreen Abubakar gives a talk about climate change impacts in New Haven to a group at the New Haven Folk Festival in October 2022. Photo: Deb Abibou



Drew Devinack, researcher from Wheaton College, looks for shell-boring worms in oysters found during the rapid bioassessment survey led by Jim Carlton in Long Island Sound last summer. Photo: Judy Benson



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