



MONTGOMERY PARKS
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MEET ALISON GILLESPIE:

A Passionate Advocate for Our Parks

We are thrilled to welcome Alison Gillespie to our Board of Trustees! A Silver Spring resident, Alison brings a deep appreciation for the outdoors, exceptional communication skills, and a strong desire to give back.

“I’m very excited to be on the Board. One reason -- it’s really nice to do advocacy work and fundraising with people who care as much about parks as I do,” Alison shares. As Chair of the Advocacy Committee, she works to ensure our parks and county residents receive the resources they need, engaging with local officials and planning board members to champion green spaces for all.

Alison’s gratitude for Montgomery Parks is fueled by her childhood experience. She grew up in a suburb that lacked public spaces and nearby parks, which was somewhat isolating for community members. When she moved to Montgomery County in 1998 as an adult, she quickly felt a sense of community by sharing park experiences with her neighbors.

Like many parents, she has fond memories of time spent with her family in the parks, including Halloween parades with her children, the weekly farmer’s market, and sledding. She also recognizes the positive impact our parks have on children. “There are generations of kids who remember sledding in the park behind my house; that shared identity is so fantastic to me,” explains Alison.

A true park enthusiast, Alison can often be found mountain biking, hiking the trails, strolling through Brookside Gardens, or speaking on urban beekeeping. When not in the parks, she serves as a public affairs specialist and Executive Secretary for Bike Maryland.

“I feel like a big Parks beneficiary; it’s nice to give back a little bit,” she reflects. We are grateful for Alison’s dedication to the parks and excited to see the impact she will make in our community!



FROM TREE TO TREASURE:

A Masterpiece at Bradley Local Park

Can a dead tree become a work of art? With your support and expert craftsmanship, the answer is a resounding YES! Thanks to the vision of Montgomery Parks Senior Urban Forester Colter Burkes and the artistry of Colin Vale, a massive dead willow oak at Bradley Local Park has been transformed into a breathtaking sculpture.

It all began in 2024 when Colter secured a grant from the Montgomery Parks Foundation. Searching for the perfect tree to repurpose, he found an enormous oak in a prominent location—free of termite damage and full of artistic potential. Enter Colin, a Maryland-based woodcarver known for his ability to breathe new life into fallen trees.

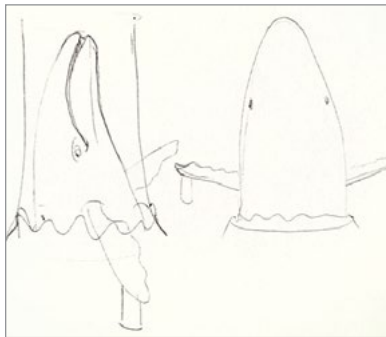
Colin approached the project with patience and precision, first removing the bark to study the wood's knots, hollows, and coloration. He envisioned a whale's head breaking through the water, but his process is never rigid. "I'd like to say it's a conversation with the tree stump. You can definitely start with an idea—you don't have to depend completely on the tree for what it wants to be, but it (the tree) does have to fit whatever your idea is. There is a physical limitation of what a tree can do, but I find staying open and keeping that conversation going throughout the whole carving gives you the best results."

Early into his carving, a few parents wandered over from the nearby Bradley Hills Elementary School. Curious, they asked Colin questions. Learning of the whale design, they excitedly shared that their school's logo is a whale's tail. Inspired by this serendipitous moment, Colin adjusted his plan—creating a magnificent Whale's Tail sculpture that now stands as a symbol of both artistic transformation and community connection.

After two months of meticulous carving, Colin completed his masterpiece in December 2024. The wood shavings and discarded bark were recycled through the Urban Wood Re-Use Program, ensuring sustainability in every step.

Thanks to Colter Burkes' vision and Colin Vale's extraordinary talent, this once-dead tree now tells a *Whale-of-a-Tale* for all park visitors to admire. Your support makes these transformations possible—thank you for keeping the arts and nature alive in our parks!

Artist Colin Vale imagines people walking up to his artistic creation, touching it kindly, and taking a picture next to it.



Colin Vale's original design plan.





A NEW VIEW:

Honoring Accessibility and Generosity at Brookside Gardens

Brookside Gardens staff believes that nature's beauty should be accessible to all. Thanks to the vision and generosity of Joan O'Rourke, a cherished friend and longtime supporter, visitors of all abilities can now experience a breathtaking new perspective of the Gude Garden Pond.

The new Viewing Platform is a stunning feature designed to offer an inclusive, immersive experience that feels like floating over the water. This innovative addition ensures that everyone, regardless of mobility, can enjoy the tranquil beauty of the gardens.

"The idea of the overlook is to provide a similar experience to being out on Gude Garden Island in the Japanese Tea House," explains Joshua Demurs, Senior Horticulturalist at Brookside Gardens. The platform's elegant design and quality craftsmanship make it not only a functional space but a beautiful enhancement to the gardens.

Securing quality workmanship and durable, visually appealing materials were extremely important to this project. The Montgomery Parks Foundation contracted with local artisans, who were instrumental in building the new feature: Hanan and Lerner Fine Woodworking, Inc., which constructed the platform from resilient, sustainable ipe wood, and Page Stonework and Landscape, which created a beautiful stone walkway using locally quarried Carderock® stone. Montgomery Parks' Ching-Fang Chen, ASLA, and Alanna Rios designed and led this remarkable project.

This Viewing Platform stands as a lasting tribute to Joan O'Rourke, whose dedication to Brookside Gardens spanned decades. As the founding president of the Friends of Brookside Gardens, Joan's passion for accessibility and natural beauty touched countless lives. Her passing in December 2024 at the age of 93 years old, left a profound impact on all who knew her.

This April, as cherry blossoms bloom in delicate shades of pink and white, a special ribbon-cutting ceremony will honor Joan's legacy. Her unwavering generosity will continue to inspire and bring joy to future generations of garden visitors.



Legacy Pavers

Looking for a way to celebrate or memorialize a loved one? A paver along the "Footsteps to Freedom" pathway at Josiah Henson Museum & Park is a wonderful option! These pavers come in different sizes and price ranges, making it an excellent opportunity for everyone. Purchasing a paver along the pathway celebrates your loved one and helps the Montgomery Parks Foundation educate visitors about the enslavement of African Americans in Maryland while teaching us 21st-century lessons about freedom, character, and values.

Interested in learning more about purchasing a paver for the Footsteps to Freedom pathway? Please contact our Development Manager, Anna Joyce, at anna.joyce@montgomeryparks.org or 301-495-2511.





2425 Reedie Drive
12th Floor
Wheaton, MD 20902

TEENS PROGRAM SPRINGS INTO ACTION:

Empowering Future Stewards of Nature

Fourteen high school students from eight Montgomery County high schools are participating in the “Teens Engaged and Empowered in Nature” (TEENS) Stewardship Program, launched on February 1. Funded by the Montgomery Parks Foundation, the program offers a four-month internship to empower young adults with hands-on environmental education and stewardship training.

Administered by Katherine Atwill, Interpretive Naturalist, and Angela Yau, Program and Facility Manager at Locust Grove Nature Center, the TEENS program is in partnership with Montgomery County Public Schools’ internship program. The teens, selected for their knowledge and motivation, are learning about ecology, local flora and fauna, and park planning and management. The program provides them with the same training as Montgomery Parks staff and volunteers while also engaging them in fieldwork like habitat restoration, trail maintenance, and wildlife observation.

Participants are required to complete individual and group projects that apply their learning and promote stewardship in their communities. The program gives teens a sense of responsibility and ownership in preserving natural spaces, fostering leadership skills, and environmental advocacy.

The impact of the program extends beyond park maintenance. It equips participants with valuable knowledge for careers in environmental science, conservation, and park management. These teens give us hope for the future of our parks and beyond.



TEENS interns, pictured above, worked in groups to create five different learning exhibits, each designed to educate the public on climate change. To reach the public, the interns and their exhibits travel on “Nature On Wheels,” a 37-foot RV.



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