



Bridge Over Troubled Water

Nonprofit arts organizations team up to create a symphonic soundtrack inspired by Tacony Creek Park → by BERNARD BROWN

TRAFFIC STREAMS over the Adams Avenue Bridge in the video on the Tacony Creek Suite website. To the motorists, the creek and the park around it are simply something to cross, but the camera, as well as the music, focus on Tacony Creek Park, the corridor of flowing water and forest in the middle.

“Each song depicts some aspect of the creek,” says Professor Randy Gibson, the suite’s composer. “Wings of Eagles” deals with the bird life of the park. “Moment of Silence” reflects the peacefulness — not death but life — surrounding the waters,” Gibson says. “‘Tacony Creek’ is a solo piano describing the creek itself. It’s more like a classical piece. It has the peacefulness and the turbulence.”

Gibson works a mile away from Tacony Creek, as the founder and a teacher at the

Gibson School of Music and Arts, but he had not spent much time in the park before being approached by Ambrose Liu, the founder and project director of the Olney Culture Lab, a program of CultureTrust Greater Philadelphia that partners with the Tookany/Tacony-Frankford Watershed Partnership (TTF) to connect residents of surrounding neighborhoods with the park.

“We partner a great deal, and we love to activate public spaces, like Tacony or Fisher Park,” says Liu. “We are bringing more awareness to the space and breaking down barriers and people’s anxieties to going into the space — breaking that fear that residents in Philadelphia might have of a space they deem unsafe.”

TTF and the Olney Culture Lab started with an oral history project. “We heard

fascinating stories from people who grew up near Tacony Creek Park,” says TTF executive director Julie Slavet. “We wanted to share those stories. We know people are connected to nature and want to talk about it. The neighborhoods have really changed a lot. We know that the people who lived around the park in 1970, they’re different people than who live there now. What we wanted to do was think of a way to connect people who had been there as kids to people who are there now.”

“The second phase entailed launching a photo competition,” Liu says, “which was the most democratic means of engaging professional and amateur artists and photographers. These days people have cameras on their phones so everyone’s a photographer. It gives us access to more lay people who



Opposite:
Eyes On Our
Landscape
Photo Contest
first place
adult winner,
“Fall Time Delights”
by Aimee Nicole Grobe.
This page:
Second place
youth winner,
“Flower Wheel”
by Gabriella Borges.

might not look at themselves as photographers, like ‘I’m not an artist, but I do take pictures when I go on bike rides.’”

Sunshine casts two shadows onto the bed of the creek in “Is It Too Much to Dream,” a photo taken by Gabriella Borges. One of the prize-winning youth photos of the Eyes on Our Landscape Photo Contest, Borges’ entry captures the feeling of the mind wandering while gazing into the creek. “Fall Time Delights,” the adult category first prize winner by Aimee Nicole Grobe, zooms in on a chipmunk poised at the edge of a log on the forest floor.

The contest, held every other year, started in 2019. The 2021 photo contest drew submissions from 75 photographers spanning the creek’s watershed, from the Montgomery County suburbs into North Philadelphia. First- and second-ranked photographers won cash prizes, and TTF worked with Olney Culture Lab to display the photographs at block parties, festivals and other neighborhood events.



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— **AMBROSE LIU**, *founder and project director of Olney Culture Lab*

“Sometimes it’s hard not to see the negative aspects of Tacony Creek Park, the neglect, litter. These people really saw the beauty,” says TTF director Julie Slavet.

After organizing the first photo contest, TTF and Olney Culture Lab commissioned four works from professional artists: local drummer Malik Henry, poet Alicia Watson Mitchell, the Esperanza Academy Dance Ensemble and Gibson, who has performed “Tacony Creek Suite” at live events such as the TTF’s 2021 Harvest Festival.

“We ended up making a documentary of it. We filmed the ensemble performing the

suite, filled it out with footage [of the creek and an interview with Gibson]. It became a documentary,” Liu says.

Gibson says he hopes the suite will help people living and working near the park to see it in a new light. “It’s a whole different area when you cross the street and come into that realm. It’s like you’re somewhere else. You walk across the street and you’re back in reality. In any environment there is the good, bad, ugly, the aesthetics of life,” Gibson says. “Philadelphia has a lot to offer. It’s aesthetically beautiful, but you won’t hear that on the news.” ♦

You can view the documentary at olneyculturelab.org/tacony-creek-suite