

## CHAPTER 2

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# GARDEN IN A VACANT LOT

## Growing Thinkers at Tree House Books

Darcy Luetzow, Lauren Macaluso, and Eli Goldblatt

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*Tree House Books is a neighborhood literary center located a few blocks from Temple University, a large, research-oriented university that has traditionally drawn students from a wide variety of social, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. We have chosen to tell the story of Tree House in multiple voices, reflecting the range of participants in this hopeful project where everyone learns and everyone teaches. Eli Goldblatt, a professor of English at Temple and a founding board member at Tree House, briefly describes the project for faculty and students interested in starting a partnership with a community group like Tree House. Darcy Luetzow, Tree House executive director from 2007-2012, introduces an interview with stakeholders Mike Reid, Sharon Turner, and Nyseem Smith. Lauren Macaluso, recent graduate of Temple's journalism program and the new volunteer coordinator at Tree House, then reflects on her experience as a tutor in this small nonprofit in North Philadelphia. The piece concludes with reflections from Eli.*

### NOT OUTREACH BUT PARTNERSHIP

Our tendency from the point of view of university programs is to see program development in the community as “outreach,” extending a hand

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from the campus to underserved neighborhoods. The impulse is not wrong, but the orientation can lead to serious mistakes in the structure of an ongoing relationship among people trying to make something productive for a given community. The chapter we present here represents some (though not all) of the components of a project that so far is working successfully to enrich and enhance literacy in a neighborhood where economic resources are few while human resources are great. The reader will learn more about Tree House Books as the dialogue unfolds, but as a literacy initiative that includes university students and faculty, we illustrate the need to put relationship building first in a university/community partnership.

Tree House Books is located in the storefront ground floors of two buildings four blocks from the campus of Temple University. Tree House serves students from age 6 to 14 and their parents, mostly living within walking distance, and offers a place for volunteer and service experiences to over 100 Temple students each semester. In the 19121 zip code, the economically stressed area of North Central Philadelphia around Tree House and immediately west of Temple across Broad Street, approximately 36,000 people live within 2.3 square miles. Here are some telling statistics about this area:

- The average adjusted gross income in 2005 was \$20,086 while the state adjusted gross income was \$48,049. Eighty-five percent of those filing taxes at that time in this area earned less than \$10,000.
- Apartment rent for a year in 19121 can be as low as \$8,000 for a studio or above \$15,000 for a three bedroom.
- Thirty-two percent of the population is under 18, and females constitute more than 55% of the population; 45% of households are headed by single parents, more than half of these headed by women.
- Thirty-six percent of people over 25 do not have a high school diploma or GED.
- The zip code area contains one branch of the public library. A second branch lies just outside the district's bounds and is open only 5 days a week until 5 P.M. Both branches could be closed due to budget exigencies.

What statistics can not tell is that this is an area rich in human potential. The parents who come to Tree House care deeply about their children, and the kids themselves bring energy and hopefulness with them into the activities at Tree House. The challenges are great, but the rewards and benefits are always greater.

I came to Tree House when it was not yet fully established as a non-profit, urged to visit by a student who walked by the storefront as it was being renovated. She found out it was going to be a bookstore with a special section for children and told me that I'd like this new project in the neighborhood. Soon after I met the landlord, who had decided to rehab the property for this purpose, and the executive director, who was working without pay or staff, I joined the board they were forming as they strove to attain 501(c)(3) status with the Internal Revenue Service. My approach was as a concerned citizen rather than as a professor looking to study a new species or teach a new class. I wanted to know how my students and I could get involved. I had access to some funding for community projects, and I offered to get one half-time graduate assistant to work 10 hours a week with the kids who came into the shop after school. Once Tree House started offering a few programs for kids, the word spread among undergraduates at Temple University that cool stuff was happening at the little bookstore on Susquehanna, and volunteers started arriving. Occasionally teachers like me have given course credit for work at Tree House, but most of the volunteers work there because they learn from the experience, and they fall in love with the kids who come. Parents began to bring their kids to Tree House events, and the board urged more planning and financial oversight as the outlines of the nonprofit organization emerged. Darcy Luetzow took over as executive director after the first 2 years of formation, and we began to pay her full-time after she and the board managed to attract some grants and donations. At every stage the need to make explicit rules and expectations for the kids paralleled a sharper understanding of what we needed from volunteer and paid staff. That is to say, the organization grew in the consciousness of what Tree House needed to be because the board, staff, and volunteers interacted with parents and concerned neighborhood adults, and we all witnessed what the kids were truly capable of producing and learning. This chapter is less about the particulars of our curriculum and more about the spirit that has informed our decisions and planning over the last 6 years.

### DARCY'S INTRODUCTION

If you stand on the sidewalk just outside of Tree House Books—facing our building—you see this: our name on the big front window and wrought iron window art that looks like tree limbs and leaves. This window art *is* artwork, but it is also a practical measure of window bars for building security. Looking past the window bars, you see shelves of books, a ladder that leads to the tree house reading loft inside Tree House, hand-made art projects—the obvious evidence of children having been here. Put your

hand on the door handle—look left and right up the block—and notice that neighbors are on their stoops, that trash overflows the one trash can on the basketball courts, that the basketball nets need replacing. Step inside Tree House Books and unpack what you have just seen from the outside.

Our wrought iron window art helps explain our North Central Philadelphia neighborhood and Tree House Books. Tree House needed to act wisely about safe-guarding our space in this at-risk neighborhood, but we didn't want to make any ugly barriers to the cultivation of trust and relationship. Choosing wrought iron window bars—in the delicate flow of limbs and leaves—achieved the desire for safety, beauty, and community. Ms. Sharon Turner, a retired nurse, community resident, and Tree House volunteer, sees Tree House “as a garden. Well, this is a vacant lot that's been turned into a garden.” Our window bars have the reality of the vacant lot (harshness, danger) and the reality of a garden (beauty, growth). Life in North Central Philadelphia is defined within the tug of war of this double reality.

I first did what you just did—stood out on the sidewalk in front of Tree House, looked inside, looked left and right—when I was a graduate student at Temple University in the creative writing program in 2005. Another facet of the double reality: Temple University's northernmost edge is just two blocks from Tree House, but Temple is almost another world. The security features and educational advantages of Temple's campus do not bridge naturally into the residential community that surrounds the university. I had walked over to Tree House Books to help with an after-school writing workshop with fourth graders offered by two colleagues of mine in the creative writing graduate program. Temple professor Eli Goldblatt, whose comments open and conclude this piece, had arranged for this workshop and had invited my friends to lead it. I walked in as a graduate student volunteer and never left. I have been the executive director of Tree House since September 2006.

When the board of directors invited me to consider the position of executive director, Eli described Tree House as “a creative experiment.” Empowered by the context of creative experiment, a position at 20-hours per week, and about \$400 in the Tree House bank, I began exploring what Tree House Books wanted to be. I started talking through a sequence of double realities with Ms. Sharon to create what Board President Jonathan Weiss describes as “a community center disguised as a bookstore.”

The bookstore disguise was a result of Tree House's initial incarnation as a community bookstore when we opened in June 2005. The founding committee had hoped for the creation of a literary culture by providing

affordable access to books. But, as we began listening to the community, we heard that the neighborhood wanted more.

We began building our core programs by listening to our neighbors and watching the ways they used the store. A critical double reality I noticed was in the children's behavior: Kids stopped in every afternoon. Kids did not stay. Children were popping into Tree House right after school, pulling books from the shelf for three to five minutes, then leaving. Why did kids want to be here and *not* want to be here? Well, why *should* they stay? There was no purpose. Sharon and I designated the two hours after school as Tutoring Time. The original program flyer invited students to “Do your homework in a room full of books!” We reasoned that almost all children had homework every day and needed a place to do it. We also reasoned that Tutoring Time could work with one child or with 10. Tutoring Time was built on three tutors (all of whom weren't here at the same time) and the premise that, if you put a sign on the table and create a thing called “Tutoring Time,” that could make kids stay.

We now support the reading and exploration of 30 children at Tutoring Time through our Life With Books initiative. We match our participants with undergraduate Temple students who assist them as tutors—more specifically, as tutoring mentors. And many of our kids *stay*. In 2010, we had 112 Tutoring Time participants; 21.3% (or 25) of those participants attended 25 or more Tutoring Time sessions. And, as of May 2011, we still saw 18 of those 25 at Tree House every week.

But some kids began to feel too old for Tutoring Time. So we listened to them and created the Junior Staff Member program, which is our leadership program for adolescents. Those young adults had something to stay for. And we created our Magazine Project, which is our hybrid art and writing workshop that meets on Wednesday nights, because we wanted to work with more kids—and begin working with a few adults. We publish a literary magazine called *The Ave.*, a title created by the children to highlight our location on Susquehanna Avenue—a long street name that many residents shorten simply to “The Ave.” Three of our participants also named our Tree Shade Summer Project, which is our summer camp. Each winter, our participants help map out the focus of the next summer's camp. We ask our participants what they would like to do at summer camp. This authentic inquiry strategy grew from realizing the double reality at Tree House Books: The adults must have some of the answers; the adults must not have all of the answers.

At the end of the day, the core Tree House reality is this: Tree House has strong programs, but the programs would disappear tomorrow if the relationships stopped. We could have purposeful programs all day long every day, but without building trust and relationships, the kids still would

not stay. And the other side of the reality is this: If we did not have the relationships, the adult volunteers would not stay, either. In the following pages, you will meet Ms. Sharon Turner, mentioned already, who is a volunteer and community member who has helped build Tree House in her retirement. You will also meet Michael Reid. Mr. Mike, as everyone at Tree House calls him, is the program and development coordinator at Tree House. With a background in the performing arts, political networking, and community engagement, Mr. Mike is passionate about the different types of trust and relatedness created at Tree House. And you will meet Nyseem Smith, who is in our Junior Staff Member Program and is a wonder of a 16-year-old. Nyseem sees himself *as* Tree House Books, not just as a young adult who has come here for 3 years. Nyseem's vision for himself, after college, is to be the next volunteer coordinator at Tree House, after Lauren Macaluso. Ms. Lauren's story follows the interview.

A final and crucial double reality: Tree House is growing a community of readers, writers, and thinkers, but most people in North Central Philadelphia do not consider themselves to be readers, writers, and thinkers. This process involves a tug of war between an expanded, giant view of agency in individuals and the degraded, minimized view of any person's intellectual capacity that is sold in negative comments, media reflection, and societal pressures. It is crucial to address this tension, because it is familiar and omnipresent. On a broader cultural level, we see this double reality play out across America—in Fayetteville, Arkansas, in Milwaukee, in El Paso, in Lilburn, Georgia where I grew up. The prosperity of cities, schools, and economies hangs inside of the tension between hopeful possibility and the sure realities of scarcity and daily struggle.

But this problematic reality is also familiar because each of us experiences this tension on a personal, individual level. Each child we work with—and each person reading these words—sits somewhere inside this uncomfortable tension: Am I a reader, writer, and thinker, really? Or am I the broken down thing others tell me I am—that even *I* sometimes tell myself that I am?

Tree House's work is vital and compelling because it deals with this tension in each individual child, volunteer, and staff member on a daily basis. In a culture where no one gets a free pass down a hallway that utters only affirmation, Tree House attempts to hold open such a passageway. When you step inside Tree House, you step inside a small, nurturing community's view of you as a reader, writer, and thinker. You can choose to take on that identity for yourself. Eventually you can explore your place and power within *a wider community* of other readers, writers, and thinkers.

## THE INTERVIEW

**Darcy:** We're going to begin a conversation about the learning and teaching at Tree House Books over the years. To begin the conversation, we will look at Tree House's Mission Statement, which I think all of you have actually memorized: "The mission of Tree House Books: to grow and sustain a community of readers, writers and thinkers in North Central Philadelphia." What do you think the statement means?

**Michael:** Growing and sustaining a community means determining what the community needs and then doing all of the things it takes to accomplish that. We want to be, in a positive way, invasive. So for me that means providing education for kids, providing a support network for their parents so they can talk to us about positives and negatives they see in the community, providing food, providing transportation, even if it's walking kids home.

**Sharon:** I see Tree House as a garden. Well, this is like a vacant lot that's being turned into a garden because when I grew up in this neighborhood there were no bookstores. There were libraries, but they weren't close. Also, reading was more prevalent then because we didn't have as many distractions. I see us growing by meeting people in the community, starting with the parents who bring children in, the store owners around the neighborhood, the community groups. We sustain by reaching out to teens like Nyseem, who is 16 years old. They're going to be the next generation to keep this going.

**Nyseem:** When I think of the Mission Statement I think of a broad or universal thing. I say that because, being at Tree House so long, I've seen the growth of kids, which is my favorite part. Getting a chance to talk to them, seeing them change from not knowing how to express themselves to then getting them to a place where they can trust in us, talk to us, and even read with us. When I was a kid, reading was always easy for me but not for the kids around me. They would always cry or find different ways to act out.

**Eli:** How have *you* grown as a reader, writer and thinker here? What did Tree House do for you?

**Nyseem:** I've grown to not be so ... in a square. I've learned to branch out and be a more understanding person. My friends used to be like, "Let's stay in our own circle and not talk to other people because they're not like us." But I've grown to understand that they are like us, in whatever shape or form, and I might actually like them. I think I've become a more helpful person, or more understanding, because I've always thought I was stubborn. And my mom still thinks that today ...

(Laughter)

**Nyseem:** (laughs) ... but I think I'm getting there!

**Darcy:** What do you think Temple contributes to Tree House books?

**Sharon:** Before, Temple was just a presence on Broad Street, and there was no contact between the community and the educational system. By encouraging volunteers to come to Tree House, Temple makes it possible for the young students here to know the older students over there, and vice versa. That makes it more of a community. We do have Temple students who now live in the area, but living in the area is not actually participating in it. This way both communities get to know each other. Tree House becomes known to the Temple community through various collaborations, and our children also learn about what's happening on campus so it's not such a fearful place, or the "unknown" to them.

**Nyseem:** I think Temple contributes mentors, because honestly most of the kids here don't have positive role models to look up to, and the Temple students give them something to, I guess, reach for in life. Kids dream to be doctors, lawyers, or teachers. And I think when they actually get to see college students firsthand, it becomes more of a reality rather than just a figment of their imaginations.

**Michael:** Temple is an avenue—an accessible way for people to help out in North Central Philadelphia. It's easier to get individuals involved because the only thing that will stop them is their desire or their availability. We wouldn't be able to do the programs we do without volunteers because 99% of our staffing is college students. College students are the perfect ingredient because they're young, relatively idealistic—not naïve, but they've had more positive experiences than negative—so it seems they don't feel like, "What's the point of doing something?" I feel like college students are hungrier to actually do something these days. And every time an impressionable child interacts with a college student, the psychological barrier that "college is a distant island that I have no connection to" becomes minimized.

**Darcy:** Are there any disadvantages to having Temple students in the neighborhood?

**Sharon:** One of the disadvantages is that these students have to graduate, and so they're gone just as they really become family. Some of them really have become family because they've been here several years, but 4 years goes really fast (laughs). I think, over the years, though, the training has become more organized. There have certainly been fewer volunteers with attitudes like: "Oh, you know, these children, they can't learn, so I'm going to just let them get away with whatever they can get away with" (laughter). I have seen them grow to say: "Okay, this is the way we're going to react," reporting back on behavior and advancements. I think that has been a marvelous progression this year, so it's a two-edged sword.

**Michael:** Thinking about it from a younger kid's perspective, even for the person who dedicated 2 years to tutoring, well, they're graduating

and moving to another part of the country or even working in a different part of the city. All of a sudden, they're not around. It's not because they don't care, but, you know, the world keeps turning. Also, college students will still be college students. One day our volunteers are sending the message: "We're adults and role models." Then our kids see another random college kid drinking beer at two in the afternoon and being obnoxious. It sends a mixed message. I've been happy that I haven't really seen any kind of racial tensions. I thought that would be a problem when I started 3 years ago because it's definitely easy to have warm feelings toward little kids but sometimes it's hard to have warm feelings about certain adults. I mean, they love the kids, and they know that to love the kids means to love their families as well.

**Nyseem:** I feel the complete same way. That's the worst part of all, toward the end of the school year seeing all the college students about to graduate, go back home, or get a job. That sucks. (laughs)

**Eli:** I don't know if you can answer this question, but I heard a hint in one of Sharon's comments. Do you feel anything about Temple as a presence nearby? When you talk about Temple, you very quickly talk about the Temple students who work at Tree House. Is there any effect on Tree House, and on the neighborhood, from the actual institution of Temple?

**Sharon:** Well ... (laughter)

**Eli:** It's okay to say whatever it is you want to say.

**Sharon:** Temple has long been considered ... what's the word when you're just trying to take over something? You know. And this has been since I was a young person and they started expanding from just a few buildings on Broad Street. Neighborhoods were bulldozed, and there was an uproar from community groups and individuals. I haven't heard so much anymore, probably due to the fact that the neighborhood was allowed to deteriorate so much by the students moving out into the neighborhood and gentrification. Temple seemingly wants to reach out to the neighborhood now. They say that they have been going around talking to different community groups all around the area before they start continuing again to bulldoze ... so that's an improvement. I don't know where it's going to lead, but I think that's actually one of the first times I have heard of somebody from Temple coming out with a plan and trying to get a reaction from the community about it.

**Eli:** I have my own concerns about Temple as an influence in the neighborhood.

**Sharon:** When you say, "influence in the neighborhood," one of my concerns is: Temple *is* in the neighborhood but I think that Temple could reach out more. They should start with the grade schools so that our kids can end up going to Temple, too. And yeah, they talk about providing

jobs, but what are the levels of the job? Are they the professors or are they the cleaners? I mean, we need cleaners but we also need professors.

**Darcy:** Let's turn to the programs occurring at Tree House. How are teaching and learning happening?

**Michael:** On a basic level, we have a simple yet profound idea of getting kids in the conversation of learning and having them understand the process. We try to have a good ratio of adults with kids. The adults assist kids with their homework whether it's really getting in the weeds and working it out with them, or just providing good supervision for a kid who has a fairly easy time getting her homework done, or just seeing them through the rough patches so that you know, the homework's completed, they understand the process of it. Then adult and kid engage in 15 minutes of reading, and then the kids will be asked to write something down, or they'll be asked questions to indicate that they understood what they read. We try to make it creative, so it's not a book report or a summary but something like, "if the book went on for another chapter, what would happen in the next chapter?" It's really being in that conversation and understanding the process and the importance. On a specific and a metaphysical level, I guess, that's how learning happens at Tree House.

**Nyseem:** I always approach it how I wanted it to be approached as a kid. I wanted, and I think they want, tutoring to be about having a conversation and then moving into simplifying homework. With reading I do the exact same thing. I just try to talk to them and then try to see where they're at, and then kind of move forward with it.

**Sharon:** I think the way we encourage reading with incentives like limousine rides are a big thing. "Read 10 books and you get a limousine ride!" I never had a limousine ride—I keep telling Darcy that! In the neighborhood, learning about edifices that are here, like the Uptown Theater and the Wagner Free Institute of Science. At the Wagner they can see how scientists in the past acted. To tell you the truth, when I was a kid I used to go to the Philadelphia Free Library, but I never went to the science museums, so these kids are really being exposed to a lot in the area. The Junior Staff Members—the middle school kids—even went to Atlantic City on a trip and saw an air show. If you expand your horizons, it is a learning opportunity. I think these kids are fortunate in being involved with Tree House Books.

**Darcy:** How does being in an educational environment outside of school affect learning and teaching, or affect our program here?

**Michael:** I actually prefer it. I feel we're at an advantage because since this is our program we can make it whatever we need it to be to fit the kids' needs. We can build an activity, a workshop, a lesson plan around a specific piece of information we want to convey, or a mindset we want to instill. The benefit is that since most of our kids have been coming in for

at least several months—and many of them several years—we know what to do with them. A good example of that happened today. A young man was being very resistant to a book I was trying to get him to read. I tried everything, and he came up with every single excuse as to why he didn't want to do it. But I was able to talk to his mom, and she said, "Oh yeah, he doesn't like books with Sesame Street characters, he'll put up a wall around it. So give him anything except that." It's like, "okay, well now that saves me 20 minutes of negotiating with him." So we're able to fine tune the approach, which is awesome.

**Nyseem:** How does being at Tree House affect learning outside of school? I think it completely enforces school. Education, it's all around you. If the kids don't know that then they won't be successful.

**Sharon:** We're fortunate we have a small group. The students can get to know the volunteers and what their expectations are, and the volunteers can step up their game and have the children progress rather than stay stagnant in what they're learning. We expect a little bit more of them. And I think that encouragement is what doesn't happen when the poor teacher has thirty, forty kids. She can't say, "Johnny, oh, I know you can do it, and I have 15 minutes to spend with you." She doesn't have that luxury, but we have that luxury because of the numbers of volunteers, for the most part, and time. And I know any teacher would love to have that luxury.

**Eli:** When I think about school these days I think about grades and standardized tests. Does it make any difference that Tree House doesn't have those high risk assessments?

**Sharon:** That's certainly not a pressure on us, and therefore we don't have to put that pressure on the kids. But we want them to be at grade level or above, so we try to encourage them from the bottom up and try to build on what they're learning in school. You know, we do have more of a luxury.

**Eli:** So are you saying that our expectations are as high or higher, but we don't have grades that enforce those expectations?

**Sharon:** Right. To me, grades are not always an indication of learning taking place. If kids actually are understanding what's going on, then that's a grade to me. But if a child comes in with a report card, and he has a D, he gets a lot of pressure from us, you know? (laughs) You know, a young child came in and he had a D, and I'm 67 and I jumped on him, Nyseem jumped on him, he's 16, and one of the tutors jumped on him, too. The child said: "So my teacher lied to me when he said that it was next to a C?" And I said, "Well yeah, it's next to a C, but it's not acceptable" (laughs). You know, that's what I mean when I say low expectation in school. The child could do better than that, even though he had difficulty he could have done better than that. And we're here to help him make it.

**Michael:** I feel that in the wrong environment a grade can be an inaccurate indicator of a person's intelligence, drive and ambition. But I also feel that in the right environment it can be an extremely accurate barometer. The core leadership of Tree House has been working on ways we can diagnose and assess so that we can actually chart progress. I feel like we have an obligation to the kids and the parents to provide that so we can continue to fine tune our programs and refine what they need. But I feel that in not having grades, it's been okay for us because there are really only three paid staff members and about 60 volunteers. So when people are showing up consistently and they're not making money, they're obviously in it for the right reasons. They're really not going to let kids slack. The volunteers are here because they actually have the hunger to make a difference. So that takes care of the ambiguity factor of, "Is this kid learning, or not?"

**Nyseem:** Well I actually feel like Tree House is the favorite teacher at school. I say that not because we aren't always negative on you, but we are more like a friend and we're still at a respective age where you should respect us. We have a 13-year-old kid here who has been coming here for maybe 2 years now, and he's definitely not on his appropriate reading level. But over time, since working with him, I've seen the necessary steps that demonstrate he's moving up. I've been proud of both myself and him.

**Sharon:** Most of the volunteers are not education majors, so we're working a little bit differently than if they were going into teaching. But I think that also it gives the volunteers ideas about how to work with children, how to work in communities.

**Eli:** How would it be different if they were teaching students?

**Sharon:** I think they would definitely have more foundation in what to look for and what to expect, which is where the plan for testing and assessment comes in. I think those students would be more aware. There's a difference between being an education major and someone just interested in imparting knowledge, and helping people find how to acquire knowledge.

**Eli:** Could you give us an example of something important you learned at Tree House, and something important you taught at Tree House? I'm going to ask Nyseem to talk about this in particular.

**Nyseem:** I've always been able to talk in front of crowds, but I think I was lacking that passion, and I think that I've grasped that from Tree House. To be so heavily involved in something, such as the Junior Staff Members, and even with the kids, being able to talk to them, knowing when a kid is having a bad day or a good day. That is something I've learned. How to be a friend but have them still look up to me has made a big impact on me since being at Tree House. And I think I've taught that

you don't always have to be the "best" reader, but just to know that one day you will be. As long as you are confident in yourself and keep working, and you take the necessary steps to become a good person and reader, then you will be fine.

**Michael:** I would say the most important thing that I've taught is that there is a plethora of options for young people. Really whatever option you choose, I'm absolutely fine with, whether that's a doctor, a football player, a plumber, or an artist who just throws eggs on a canvas all day (laughter). Any of those I support, as long as you do it because you really want to do it, not because it's expected of you, because of what your skin color is, or where you come from or how tall you are. And if you do it, be the best at it. If you're going to throw rotten eggs at a paint canvas, be the best at it in the universe. The most important thing that I've learned is that if you want something, you will get it. You may have to ask for it 2 million times for 2 years, but you will get it eventually. And I've heard people say this, and I used to believe it theoretically, but I didn't really believe it concretely: The thing that you're looking for is looking for you as well.

**Sharon:** I hope that one of the things I've taught is that much is expected of each individual child. You can't just "skate." You need to learn and grow. And also be respectful of adults. I hope that's one of the things I've taught. One of the most important things I've learned here is how important it is to have a safe environment for children to learn and grow intellectually and also become more aware of their community. Even something as simple as hanging tags around and making a place more beautiful or throwing seed bombs. You would never think of that, but then they get to see the community and realize they are part of a community. And hopefully, me being here as an older person, shows them that there's never an end to learning.

#### LAUREN'S REFLECTIONS ON BEING A NEIGHBOR IN NORTH PHILADELPHIA

I graduated from Temple University in May 2011. What made my college career a success didn't manifest itself right after receiving a diploma; I've known all along that my academic career was affected more by volunteering in North Philadelphia, just one block off of Temple's campus, than networking, studying, or socializing. I walked into Tree House Books 3 years ago looking for a paid position because from the outside it appeared to be a used bookstore. At the time, I was living across the street with seven other Temple undergraduates. Upon entering, a young man about 14 years old introduced himself as Nyseem and proceeded to tell

me, with some laughter in his eyes, that there were no paid positions available at Tree House Books, but I could be a volunteer tutor. I filled out an application on the spot and was asked to come back the next day by Michael Reid, the program coordinator. Little did I know my experiences there would prepare me better for “the real world” than sitting in any classroom.

It only took a few weeks for me to realize that Tree House was capable of reconstructing a Temple student’s opinion of themselves and of North Philadelphia. As a Temple student I was used to everyone talking about the neighborhood as if they understood it. Students brushed aside receiving TU Alerts about a shooting nearby because they thought it was typical of North Philly. It was not rare for these realities to be kickers in a lot of my friends’ jokes. At the end of one of my first tutoring sessions, I accidentally slipped one such joke into my conversation at Tree House Books. Michael Reid, or Mr. Mike as I began to call him, quickly pulled me aside and advised me to watch what I say. He said, “Lauren, now that you’re volunteering here, you should really watch how you speak about North Philly. The parents and kids we work with live here.” That was a pivotal moment for me: realizing that what I said had the power to shape how people think. For the first time, I was being held accountable for the way I thought, spoke, and perceived the community surrounding where I went to school.

Now, as part of my job as the Volunteer Coordinator at Tree House, I get to witness other tutors come to terms with their own understanding of North Philly. In September 2011, to kick off the new school year, we invited all the parents of the Tree House kids to participate in a parent orientation and family dinner. We talked about the rules, the ins and outs of programs, and read aloud the Tree House Books Pledge, which starts off with our mission: “I choose to be a reader, writer and thinker.” Afterwards, we opened the floor up for questions and suggestions from parents. They had, really, only one question, “How can we support Tree House?” One parent suggested donating snacks, one suggested collecting change, and all agreed that it was their duty as parents and members of the community to give back to Tree House Books for tutoring and mentoring their children after school.

I was overwhelmed by this enthusiasm, and so was another tutor, Steph. Steph is a junior early childhood education major at Temple University, and at the time a team leader for Tutoring Time on Tuesdays. As the parents piped in with words of encouragement and support, Steph sat in her seat tearing up. She told me later that her tears were ones of happiness because she was able to witness such loving words coming from the members of a community many Temple students view as a place filled

with hate. She said, “I don’t know how I ever thought badly about North Philly before.”

At Tree House Books, college students are learning from school-aged kids through everyday exchanges, allowing for a reciprocity of learning that happens when you least expect it. I had a different realization two summers ago in our backlot garden. I was watering the garden with Sharon Turner, a volunteer and longtime community member. As she was explaining to me that the green, leafy part of a carrot also tastes like the orange part, I noticed one of the Tree House 6-year-olds, James Wilson, riding his bike in the empty lot adjacent to our garden. The lot has been a frustration to the Tree House Books staff and board of directors for some time. No matter how many times it was cleared of weeds and litter, a mess always returned. But seeing James ride his bike through it just made me think “he deserves better.” All of the children with whom we work deserve a sanctuary which, in my opinion, is what Tree House Books strives to be each day.

James rode his bike up to the fence of our garden and seeing he had my attention said, “Hey Ms. Lauren!” I replied by asking him if he wanted to try a carrot. I handed it to him through the metal fence and as he grabbed it, our attention was drawn to the left where some Temple students were throwing a party. It was Spring Fling on Temple’s campus. Spring Fling is notorious for early drinking, skipping class or attending class intoxicated, and something called “Kegs and Eggs.” A house of Temple students that shared Tree House’s backyard wasn’t wasting any time in celebrating. As the carrot was exchanged through the fence, we heard the crash of a 40 oz. glass beer bottle that was thrown over the fence and into the empty lot by one of the students. My eyes wandered back to James. He saw the same thing I had but thought nothing of the act and continued to tell me about his new school and why he hadn’t been at Tree House lately.

I think about James in that abandoned lot whenever I find myself forgetting the very real impact just knowing one child in North Philly can have on a college student. That experience in the garden has shown me that Tree House is building a fortress around these kids, protecting them from what they cannot see coming—whether it be a glass beer bottle or, in a larger sense, illiteracy, poverty, and food inequities. Tree House is also there to protect positive exchanges, ones that allow for just-picked carrots to be passed through fences, and 6-year-olds to talk with Temple University undergraduates who are also talking with longtime community members they would not have otherwise met. Tree House Books’ mission extends to the volunteers just as much as it does to the children. I’ve seen it happen. Once an undergraduate student begins to see herself as a reader, writer and thinker in North Central Philadelphia, she is no longer “just another Temple student.” She is forever Ms. Lauren or Ms. Steph.



My hope is that each year Tree House Books gains an undergraduate student whose understanding of North Philly is completely changed, and all because they accept the chance to be taught by the powerful people who surround them.

### ELI'S THOUGHTS ON BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS AT TREE HOUSE

As I look over the phrases and descriptions used by participants in this interview, I'm struck by how often all three emphasize trust and relationship building as a way to teach reading and writing. Mike Reid focuses us at the outset on honest needs assessment followed by a concerted effort to meet those needs. He sees the mission at Tree House Books to require "really determining exactly what is needed, and actually doing it." This plan provides an excellent road map for success in any school or social service agency, but he is concerned most, I think, with developing the sort of trust among neighbors that would ensure their support and a healthy attitude among students who come to us every day after school. People in a stressed neighborhood need to feel that the staff in a literacy program respects the community enough to deliver on promises.

Nyseem graduated from eighth grade at a neighborhood school and is now visiting colleges in preparation for applying next year. He speaks almost exclusively out of his identification with the mission of the staff, not the students. He emphasizes this same theme of trust building: "getting them to a place where they can trust in us, talk to us, and even read with us." I admire Nyseem's commitment to the younger kids he has come to feel are his charges, but I also feel his words indicate what a success Tree House had with *him*. His sense of himself as an understanding and helpful person is largely tied, in his testimony, to his interaction with the kids he has seen growing there, but I can't read his words without thinking how much he himself must have grown to get to this point. Tree House served as a safe space for him to care about someone other than himself; he can judge his actions by how well others thrive. For a 16-year-old boy to develop such commitment is a tribute to him and his family, but it also suggests that literacy is being framed at Tree House as a group effort, as an enterprise where the older ones gain by the progress of the younger ones. Nyseem may be an outstanding young man, but he's not an anomaly. Tree House does foster a culture of caring within which reading and writing can mean more than a set of marketable skills.

Sharon represents a voice from the neighborhood. She shows great concern for the kids who come in the afternoon, kids she regards as her own in large measure. But I was pleased to see that she sees the young Temple volunteers in a similar light. She makes the distinction between

students who don't know that "living in the area is not actually participating in it" and those who extend themselves to touch the lives of their neighbors at Tree House. She doesn't show the animus against Temple as a thoughtless bully on the block, as others in the neighborhood are likely to feel, because she sees the college students who come in regularly and really make an attempt to understand as well as to instruct. They come to see her neighborhood as not so "fearful" or "unknown," and in return she welcomes them and sees the university as "contributing to Tree House."

I think Tree House transforms the attitudes of children and college students alike because of its emphasis on trust and relationship. Gains in decoding skill and vocabulary and writing proficiency will come in their own time, but relationship makes those gains possible and even likely. My students come back from Tree House with a new light in their eyes, and over time they admit to me that not only do Tree House kids need them but that they—the independent, grown up, going-somewhere college students—need the kids. I feel it myself when I walk the five blocks from my office to Tree House. The glass and brick architecture of a big university abruptly ends, and I'm walking past Afifa Fashion & Variety store, New Beginnings hair salon, and the window of our workshop storefront. Before I push open the glass door of the bookstore entrance, I might exchange a few words with the two or three guys selling underwear and hats and shirts out of cases on the street in front of the more or less boarded up shop painted a deep blue next door. I am not an academic anymore, and for all the problems on this street, I'm relieved to be here.

As Darcy points out in her introduction, the double realities in American culture can play out starkly in this neighborhood. However, sometimes at Tree House we can focus our energies on our singular purpose. The tiered system of privileges at the university or in the office buildings of Center City mean very little here on Susquehanna Avenue. At Tree House respect comes to those who show up and do the work alongside everybody else. This is a group I want to be a part of, to learn from, to nurture and be nurtured by.