



STRIDES THROUGH AN

Urban Trail

BY MELISSA CORCORAN HOPKINS | PHOTOS COURTESY
GENESEE LAND TRUST

How do you transform abandoned city lots into a community resource?

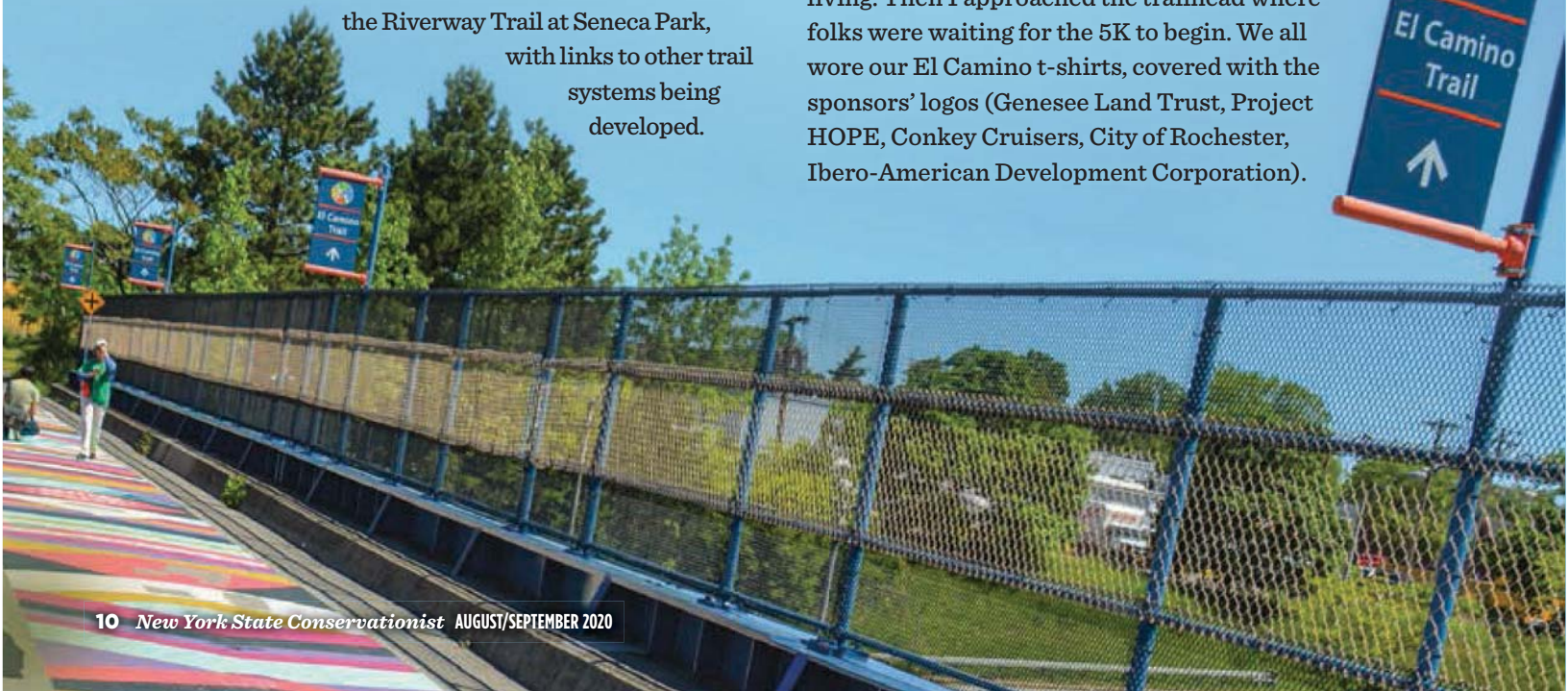
Create a nature trail.

In a win for the environment and residents of Rochester, a 2.25-mile greenway trail has transformed and revitalized formerly abandoned lots into a community treasure. Thanks to The Thomas R. Frey Trail at El Camino, and the community action that it inspires, families now have a place to meet and kids have a place to play. Like its medieval European namesake, El Camino de Santiago, this multi-use trail is a pilgrimage of hope and renewal.

Rochester has joined the country's rails-to-trails movement, giving more city dwellers access to nature by converting an abandoned freight railbed, in the City's northeast quadrant, into an accessible, public trail. The northbound trail runs east of the Genesee River and connects urban neighborhoods to the river. It begins just north of the 90-foot High Falls and returns to the river and the Riverway Trail at Seneca Park, with links to other trail systems being developed.

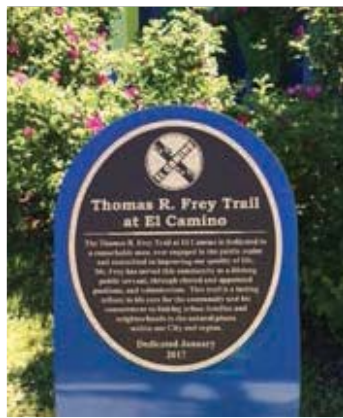
For each of the past six years, on National Trails Day in June, Rochesterians of all ages turn out for the 5K Walk @ El Camino. This rite of spring showcases the successes the community shares and the challenges it faces. The trail inspires everyone: kids pedal in trike and bike clubs; families hike; seniors stroll; residents share community gardens; native trees and shrubs nurture pollinators and wildlife; and youth and college students groom the trail. Along the way, the trail tells a story. In a 2013 Wall/Therapy project, artists painted murals on commercial buildings and a faux festive carpet on the footbridge crossing Route 104. In these murals and on the pavement, multi-lingual, inspirational quotations encourage travelers on the path.

June 2019 was my third year walking the El Camino 5K. Each time, I meet more change agents shaping the El Camino story. At the front check-in table this year, friendly teens helped me register and I picked up flyers about Foodlink and Healthi Kids, two community programs that support healthy living. Then I approached the trailhead where folks were waiting for the 5K to begin. We all wore our El Camino t-shirts, covered with the sponsors' logos (Genesee Land Trust, Project HOPE, Conkey Cruisers, City of Rochester, Ibero-American Development Corporation).





Change Agent, officer Moses E. Robinson



The El Camino trail was rededicated to Thomas R. Frey for his commitment to neighborhood revitalization.

As I sat down on a rock nearby to pin on my registration number, a police officer with a solid frame and steady gaze strode over and introduced himself. “Hello, I’m Moses,” he said, as he reached out his hand and led me through a five-step handshake. Officer Moses E. Robinson gave me his card, which featured his photo and focus: EQ, Emotional Intelligence, working with youth, corrections, and school safety.

A petite lady in a white jean jacket introduced herself as Hilda Rosario Escher. She pointed to the modest, but sturdy building next door, with the word HOPE painted in huge letters on the side. She explained that when her family moved to Rochester from Puerto Rico, she learned English there at the Ibero-American Action League (IBERO), and then stayed on to coordinate the bi-lingual program. She continued to take on projects and ultimately stayed for 40 years—12 years as its CEO.

The Ibero-American Development Corporation (IADC) builds and manages commercial and residential property, with state, federal, and foundation grants. While the trail was in its planning process, IADC acquired abandoned lots in the neighborhood and built 50 new affordable-housing units, called El Camino Estates. Hilda recalls how community needs have emerged, “Kids used to play in the IBERO parking lot; they needed a park!”

Genesee Land Trust (GLT) staff, volunteers, and partners manage the logistics of the Walk. GLT is a partnership powerhouse—a non-profit conservation organization that is supported by contributions from community members and the Rochester Community Area Foundation. GLT is ever scouting for land and waterways to preserve, like this location.

Thomas R. Frey is a former board member of GLT, and was key in creating the El Camino trail. As a retired Monroe County Executive, businessman, and conservationist, he advocated for change wherever he saw a need. In 2000, GLT embarked on unexplored territory

for the local land conservation organization, acting as a catalyst to create a greenway trail—A ribbon of green—brightening the urban landscape.

Tom Frey and Gay Mills (GLT’s Executive Director) worked with neighborhood stakeholders to create support for the trail. Over 12 years, GLT galvanized a collaborative team to reach three community milestones. First, it worked with neighborhood partners, city departments, and state and federal legislators to secure federal funding for Rochester to convert the abandoned rail corridor into a city park trail, which ultimately opened in 2012.

Second, GLT secured a grant to make a gateway to the trail. In 2008, working with neighborhood block clubs, schools, and a local business, they built Conkey Corner Park. Named for Conkey Avenue, the park anchors the trail and community activity.

In 2010, the partners achieved a third milestone when they built a state-of-the-art playground. They worked with IADC’s newly-formed Project HOPE to build a playground surfaced with mulch, planted with bulbs and native flowering trees, and framed by hardscape benches, aided by grants from the Greater Rochester Health Foundation and Rochester Garden Club. GLT and IADC help the City and residents to maintain the playground, a place where local kids can enjoy the outdoors in a safe environment.



Kids now have a place to play—local children enjoy the state-of-the-art playground maintained by the city and residents.





The multi-use trail inspires everyone: kids peddle in trike and bike clubs; families hike; and seniors stroll.

The trail, park, and playground are assets that continue to generate momentum. In 2012, after construction of El Camino was completed and the trail was ready to open, local resident and nurse Theresa Bowick rallied people of all ages to live a healthy and active lifestyle. She started a local bike club, El Camino Conkey Cruisers, with donated bikes. In 2016, Project HOPE of IADC produced an El Camino neighborhood revitalization plan, with the Rochester Community Design Center, GLT, and Conkey Cruisers. The action plan calls for programs to build healthy lifestyles and relationships. DEC provided support for stewardship and programming of the trail via two NYS Conservation Partnership Program grants in 2012 and 2015 totaling \$53,000.

In 2017, the El Camino community rededicated the trail to Tom Frey posthumously, for his commitment to the neighborhood's revitalization. That same year, AmeriCorps awarded GLT a crew from the National Civilian Community Corps to provide a month of maintenance to the trail and park, in honor of Tom Frey.

At 9:00 a.m., the Walk began. TV cameras captured representatives from the neighborhood, city, county, and state, all there to celebrate the El Camino Walk and

community strides. Dozens of kids ran with their arms outstretched to break the starting-line paper banner. Behind them, friends and families set their own pace with strollers, scooters, walking sticks, and canes. Police officers on horseback and bikes escorted us.

The trail is lined with flowering wonders, including blooming fringe trees, pink catalpa, serviceberry, phlox, and columbine. Urban box gardens contained fragile sprouts, where expectant markers forecasted the growth of collards, garlic, onion, and tomato. From previous visits, I know that the trail provides easy access to Conkey Corner Park, Seneca Park, and the Genesee Riverway Trail, which expands a visitor's ability to explore the area, including the option to cross the Genesee River over a spectacular trestle. It's a wonderful oasis in the middle of the city—a place for urban dwellers to connect with nature, and we are all here to celebrate it.

On the trail, I came alongside a tall, reserved young man named Stanley Glover. As the GLT Ambassador Youth Program Leader, Stanley worked with local teens in the Landscaper Apprentice Program. They maintain El Camino's trails year-round, with help from local college



Girl Scouts serving water to participants of the 5K Walk @ El Camino.



A faux carpet on a foot bridge, painted by local artists as part of a Wall/Therapy project.



Another Change Agent, Stanley Glover, the Genesee Land Trust Ambassador Youth Program Leader.

students and the community. Stanley mentioned that he grew up in this neighborhood and recalled, “There was a lot of evil here.” A mom named Wanda commented, “The trail keeps the kids busy,” and an elderly gentleman who has lived here for 50 years added, “This trail transformed us and gave us hope.”

I heard horns and conga drums at the finish line before I saw them, and I passed under an arc of rainbow balloons with kids cavorting and cheering us home. When the walk was over, everyone was hungry and we grabbed food from the corner deli and waiting food trucks.

The nature trail at El Camino is a wonderful resource for hikers and bikers and I enjoy exploring it throughout the year. While I’m strolling, enjoying the views, I can’t help but wonder—what if we can work to make more nature trails, more El Caminos? The pilgrimage is born of local vision; plant a seed and enlist stakeholders to nurture it. Transformation is homegrown, as Gay Mills envisions, in a ribbon of green, a trail of hope.

Melissa Corcoran Hopkins is a writer, teacher, kayaker, and native Rochesterian: HopkinsBeyondWords.com



On National Trails Day for the past six years, Rochesterians of all ages turn out for the 5K Walk @ El Camino.

PLEASE VISIT

Myelcamino.org and Geneseelandtrust.org for maps, photos, and stories.

New York State Trails

New York State has many multi-use trails, including paths, rail trails, and greenways. Some are short local paths, while others are part of longer regional or statewide trails. There are more than 1,200 miles of trails located across New York State, including 110 multi-use trails, and chances are there is one close to you.

If you are looking for places to hike, bike, walk, run, or cross-country ski, or seeking a new trail to explore, check out DEC’s website at: www.dec.ny.gov/62.html.

