

## THE HEALTHY RIPPLE EFFECT, EXPLAINED

# “A chance encounter shifted the course of my career and happiness”

By Alicia White, as told to Jane Bianchi

In 2014, when I was 27, I got off the train one evening in Queens, New York, to walk home after a long day at my stressful job as an events director at an arts company. For weeks, I'd noticed a neighbor cleaning out the green space between our neighborhood and the railroad station.

That night, she was weeding and picking up litter, and I decided to ask her why she was out there. “It’s not that I enjoy coming out here. I just feel like if I don’t do it, it won’t get done,” she said. I thought, *She shouldn’t be out here by herself.* So

I volunteered to join her that Saturday, and recruited my sister and some friends and neighbors too.

We made progress over the weekend, but there was still a lot to do—and I quickly realized that it was more than we could accomplish on our own. I knew we needed to find funding and support. I did some online research, which helped me land a city fellowship that taught me about how to improve parks in general. I applied for a grant, which gave me the money to create a nonprofit called Project Petals, along with a website. Once my organization was officially

Cleaning up a forgotten public space turned into a wow moment for one woman.

a nonprofit, I was eligible to apply for even more grants. Everything just snowballed.

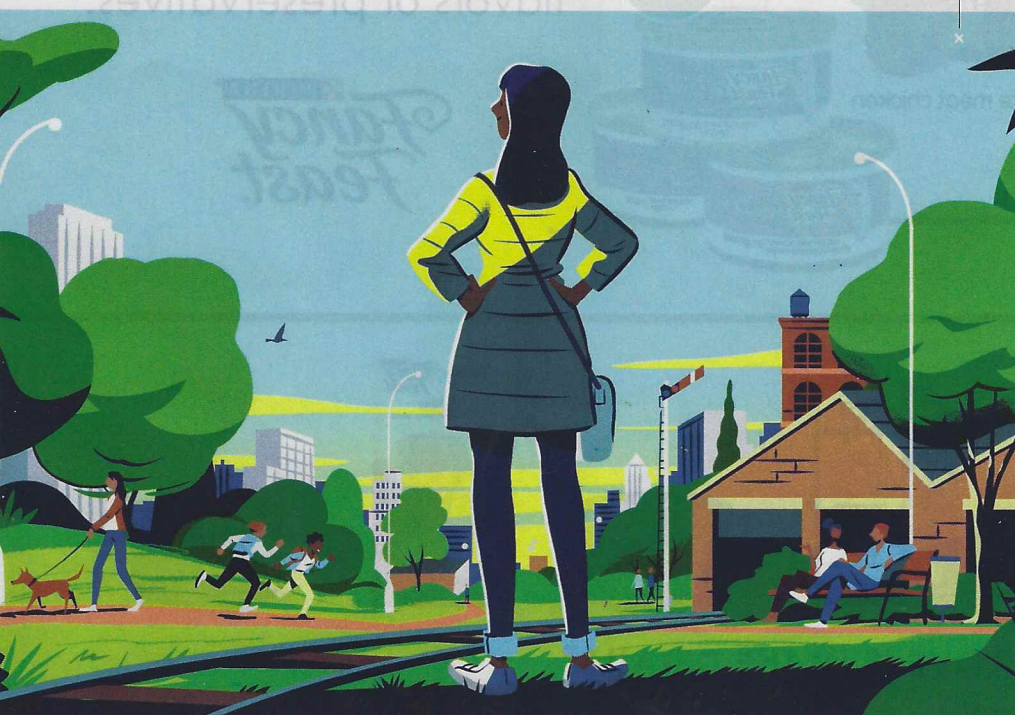
I also contacted my state senator, who explained that my park (named Railroad Park) is owned by three different local agencies—the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation, the Metropolitan Transit Authority, and the New York State Department of Transportation. He helped me set up meetings with all three of them so I could make a strong case for why our park deserved more resources.

Even though I had absolutely zero prior experience in landscaping or gardening, my efforts turned Railroad Park into a beautiful space that the community loves. A dirt path became an asphalt path, a trash bin was put in place, new fencing was installed, more lighting helped people feel safer, sidewalks encouraged exercise, and a gardening area made everyone smile.

I enjoyed this volunteer work so much that it didn’t even feel like “work.” Transforming the space completely changed my mindset. Suddenly, my purpose was clear: I felt empowered and excited to make a direct and positive difference in people’s lives.

So, a year and a half after that initial conversation with my neighbor, I quit my job and focused full-time on Project Petals. The organization has grown so much in the past few years; I currently work with community groups and school districts, and I’ve aided more than 2,000 people in changing green spaces all over New York City.

In my last job, I felt exhausted and on edge all the time. I’d dread going to work on Mondays. I used to wonder, *Am I doing enough to help others?* I felt something was missing. Now I’m relaxed, happy, and confident. I take better care of myself too. Once I gathered the courage to step outside my comfort zone, I figured out what I wanted to do with my life, and everything else made sense. I want to leave this world a little bit better than I found it, and by improving public spaces, I’m able to do that daily.



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