



ELIZABETH ROBERTSON / Staff Photographer

Khalif Moore, 19, handles the mowing while Jaleel Buie, 17, weeds a flower bed in the 7000 block of Ogontz Avenue. They join other teens from MLK High School in running the landscaping business Teens Go Green.

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In West Oak Lane, teens learn the landscaping trade

By Kia Gregory

Inquirer Staff Writer

One hazy afternoon, a green pickup truck pulls in front of Elizabeth Peoples' home in West Oak Lane, and out jumps supervisor Jeff Daniels and two teen workers, all in matching T-shirts. They unload lawn mowers and hedge clippers and begin to maintain the beauty they had created a few weeks earlier.

The crew, Teens Go Green, a new venture operated by neighborhood teenagers, has a mission this summer: to make West Oak Lane the most attractive neighborhood in the city.

In late spring, Peoples' backyard was an overgrown jungle of bushes and weeds in desperate need of shaping and mulch. Her front lawn was a perennial graveyard. The yew shrubs grew wild.

Peoples, 72, has lived in a corner house on Ogontz Avenue for almost 40 years and has operated a beauty salon in her basement nearly as long.

In her yard, throughout the years, she enjoyed dinner and other quiet moments. Throughout the summer, she hosted family cookouts and birthday parties there.

"So I want it to look nice," she says of her backyard oasis. "But I can't do it myself." Arthritis, she says. "But I know about landscaping. My father was a landscaper. So I know what it's supposed to look like."

For Teens Go Green, which opened for business in the spring, Peoples offers the perfect opportunity.

The program's mission is to give young people the opportunity to learn a marketable skill and provide a service to the community.

In Peoples' yard, Jaleel Buie, 17, a rising senior at Martin Luther King High School, tackles the weeds in the garden of daisies, marigolds, and begonias he helped design and plant a few weeks ago.

Behind him, Khalif Moore, 19, who just finished his freshman year at Montgomery County Community College, pushes a lawn mower.

Daniels, 45, a professional landscaper for more than 20 years, grabs a mower and heads to the front of the house, where the crew recently planted a bed of annuals.

Teens Go Green is sponsored by the nonprofit Urban Tree Connection, which helps urban communities transform abandoned eyesores into green spaces. It is also sponsored by Foundations Inc. and MLK High School.

Under Daniels' expertise and supervision, two crews of three teens work 20 hours a week on lawn maintenance, flower beds, small vegetable gardens, light tree work, and mulching, at \$7.25 an hour.

Back in the West Philadelphia office, another teen helps with invoicing, record-keeping, and marketing.

With summer heating up, the business has 46 clients.

The program's seven students were selected based on their maturity, leadership qualities, and previous landscaping experience, said Urban Tree Connection founder and executive director Skip Weiner.

"Even if they never go into the landscaping business," Weiner says, "the skills that are being learned, how to operate on a job, are extremely important.

"And they get a much greater sense of environmental issues and how they operate in the community."

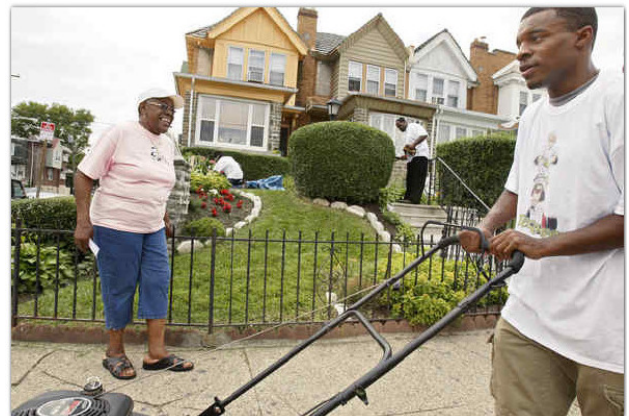
Growing up in West Oak Lane, Buie used landscaping as an odd job, "so this was up my alley," he says.

With the program's steadier work, he's saving for college, where he plans to study psychology.

For now, "I just get pleasure from seeing my work, especially on jobs like this where everyone can see it," he said.

Moore, a business major, echoes the sentiment.

"It's peaceful to see that your hard work can blossom into something beautiful. It makes me feel good to help people out. And it lets teens know they can work for themselves."



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Elizabeth Peoples watches happily as Khalif Moore, 19, prepares to pack up the lawn mower after a day of landscaping at her Ogontz Avenue home.

When Peoples read a flier on her block telling of the fledging business' "professional expertise" and "competitive rates," she thought of her wretched yard and the hatchet jobs it has endured, and thought, "Why not?"

When she learned it was run by neighborhood youths, she picked up the phone.

"It would give them something to do," she says, "and for those not going to college, they could make a living for themselves."

For Daniels, who also grew up in West Oak Lane, landscaping was "the best decision I ever made."

Twenty-two years ago, laid off as machinist at a Bensalem scrap-metal yard, Daniels took a job at Pennsylvania State University as a security guard. Three years later, he noticed a job posting for a landscaper.

"That job stayed open for a year," he said. "Nobody wanted it."

Daniels reasons that was because of the low pay and the guarantee of working in all of nature's elements. But as the father of a newborn son, he needed the health benefits.

He worked that landscaping job at Penn State for 19 years before starting his own business.

"It gives you a chance to be creative in designing," he says of landscaping. "And I've always liked working with my hands."

Now with his three kids in college, Daniels uses landscaping to help others.

Weiner recruited him as program director for Teens Go Green based on his expertise, mentoring experience, and no-nonsense demands on quality, which Daniels jokes isn't his fault. His father was a Marine.

"I knew it was a kid-driven program," Daniels says, "and that it would take more sacrifice than money. I jumped at the chance."

In planning the business, Daniels stressed professionalism to the teens. When it came to training, he soon realized that they knew nothing, not even how to start a lawn mower.

"That's really why I'm so proud of them," he says. "They learned so quickly.

"More so, they understand you always have to give back. You want to be in a position where you're a giver, because givers do well."

With calls coming in, business has expanded to other Northwest neighborhoods, such as Germantown and East Mount Airy. And there are repeat customers like Peoples, whose lawn the teens maintain every two weeks, for \$45.

As the teens finish up, Peoples surveys her yard, where a beige canopy sits in the center, and two barbecue grills

stand at the ready, off to the side. There's a pink rosebush that's "been fighting for a long time," she says, and her newly trimmed rhododendron bushes and freshly cut grass.

For their next visit, she requests an apple tree.

Before long, the salon's screen door claps open.

"What a beautiful job!" shouts beautician Earline Gallashaw, standing on the sidewalk, her mouth agape.

Then she makes her plea. "I need help."

When Gallashaw moved into her house a few blocks away, her "huge" yard was a mess of weeds, brushes, and fallen trees. After paying to have it cleared, it's now a barren wasteland. She dreams of grass and flowers, but "my husband can't do it by himself. He thinks he can, but he's too old."

Laughing, Daniels hands her a card.

Walking away, Gallashaw is sold.

"Oh, Lord, it needs help," she says, shaking her head, stepping back into the salon.



Buie uses a leaf blower to clear debris from an alley behind Ogontz Avenue. He will be a senior at Martin Luther King High in the fall