

Up the Creek, part two

Sound Walk projects at Southwest and Redhouse May 9

By Nancy Keefe Rhodes

County Executive Joanie Mahoney's enlightened decision to step back from the Armory Square sewage plant in favor of green technology occurs in a community that has been talking about life on the Creek in an abundance of voices. This Friday, two of three "sound walk" projects about Onondaga Creek will be done and ready to borrow on CD and portable players, one at Redhouse Arts Center in the Armory Square district and the second in Southwest Community Center's library on South Avenue.

Not exactly oral history, not quite the usual audio tour – though that's how people will use them – the sound walk is an emerging art form that Iranian-American artist Fereshteh Toosi says emphasizes "deep listening to your environment" and could be compared to National Public Radio's on-going "Story Corps" series. The 15-minute sound walks that her six undergraduate students in CAS 200 at Syracuse University have produced this spring incorporate interviews with Syracuse residents affected by the Creek, ambient sounds and voice-over narrations.

Toosi's own sound walk, which she'll install in July, focuses on Creek stories from the city's Valley section. Toosi is wrapping up a year as Ford Foundation Faculty Fellow in Arts and Civic Engagement. Last fall, she led a writing seminar on the history of public art in Syracuse. This spring's course swelled well beyond the classroom, initially inspired by local activists' efforts to thwart the Midland Avenue sewage plant's construction and a variety of on-going campaigns with the Creek as their centerpiece. Toosi held a series of community gatherings – among them, in January at the Center for Peace and Social Justice and at Beauchamp Library, in April a potluck beside the Creek at the Zen Center on Seneca Turnpike – and has interviewed over 20 Syracusans in depth about the Creek's history and place in their lives. On April 26 she spoke at the Black Women's Health and Environmental Justice Symposium here on a panel on environmental justice and the arts, days after her students offered rough cuts of their projects during SU's annual Mayfest.

Toosi recruited students for the Experimental Documentary and Sound Art course with flyers and pizza, and six of them stuck it out. In the *City Eagle's* March 27 issue, we spoke with Toosi. Last week, her students commented on their experiences with this project. Though sound is an elusive medium, all the students mentioned how it's sensitized them to what they didn't notice visually before, and all found some application to their future careers and lives as citizens. Here are excerpts from those conversations, first from the three producers of the Armory Square-focused "Colors of the Creek."

"I took the class because my friend Alison took it," said Kallee Rinehart, a senior from Michigan who graduates this weekend with a degree in magazine journalism. "At first I was skeptical, but I've liked what I've found. We concentrated on Armory Square because we really like Armory Square. People might not notice that the Creek runs through there, that it's channelized, or some of the architecture. People go to restaurants and don't see what's there. We still have to finish the editing, record the narration and put in the pauses but it's mostly finished. There's no music. We have sounds of kids at the MOST, car sounds, creek sounds. I'd definitely recommend this course or one like it, but not if they're just looking for an extra class – you need to actually care. It will benefit my career, especially if I decided to try radio."

"I was interested in audio work so I jumped on it," said Peg McWeeney, a junior from Annapolis, MD, majoring in political science and international relations with a Spanish minor. "It was so out of my field but I really enjoyed it. I've asked Fereshteh if there's any way I could do more work on this project and I'd like to see how to apply audio work in my field. The Creek is so polluted downtown, so our title refers to that. We talked with citizens, businessmen, the woman who owns Marisa's beauty salon, a City engineer. It's a good walk. It was totally enriching. Sometimes everything is so cut off between the schools on campus. I learned about a whole new field I might even want to pursue. I listen to NPR all the time – actually everyone in my group does. It's a stereotype that young people only listen to satellite radio and kind of an unfair one too."

"I saw a flyer for the class and I thought it was cool – meaning I'd get more of a chance to do something different," said Alison Baitz, a Newhouse junior from Laurel, MD, majoring in magazine journalism. "We've had some obstacles but I guess they were learning opportunities. There is a heavy narrative in our project. The Creek's not colorful in Armory Square now but it once was. I'm interested in radio and I wanted some audio editing experience. The final project makes it worthwhile because it has the potential to make a difference."

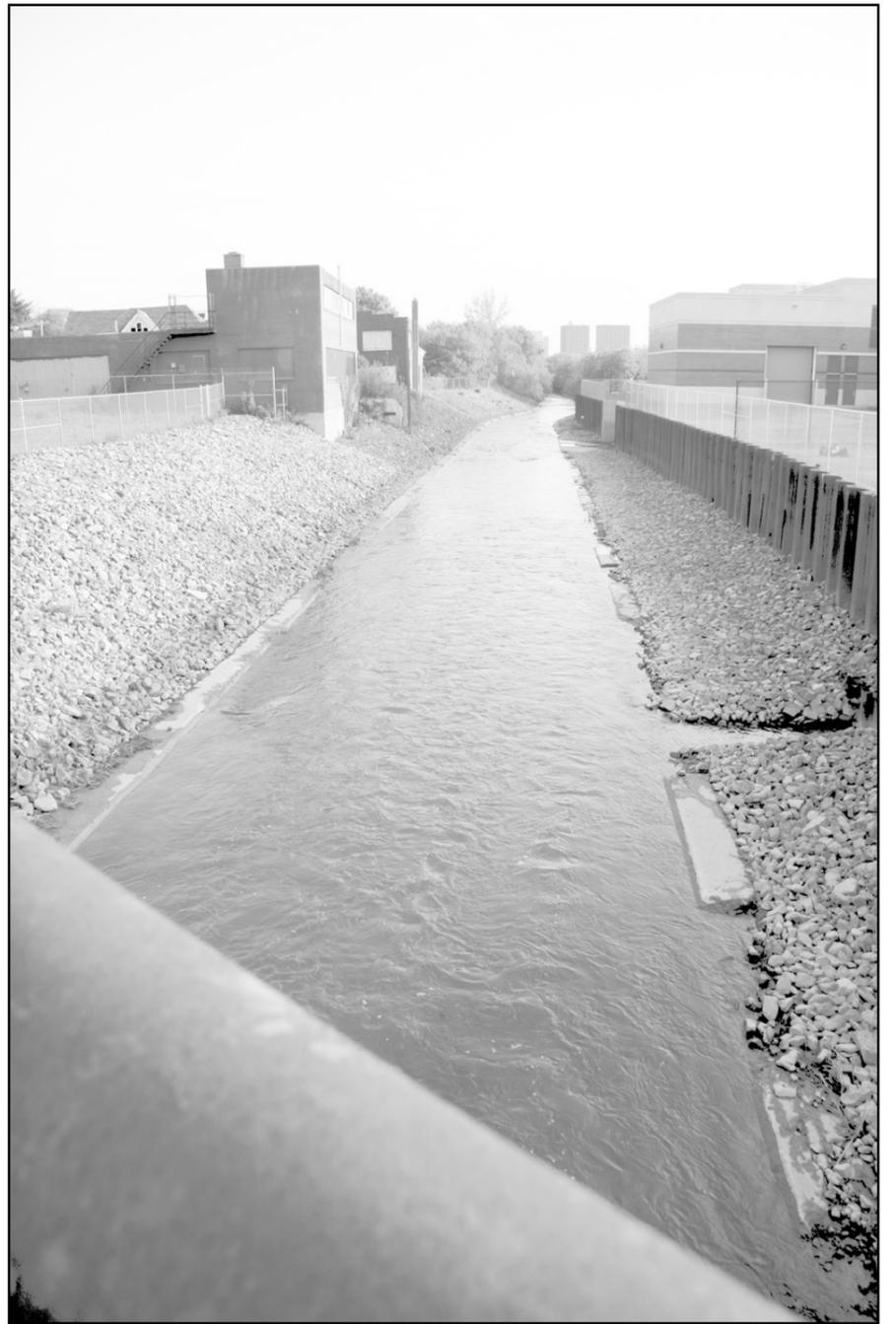
The second sound walk

The second sound walk, also made by three students, takes you from Southwest Community Center on South Avenue to the bridge above the Creek on Midland Avenue.

"I wanted to explore what sound art was and the making of documentaries," said Kristian Rodriguez, a sophomore acting major from Atlanta, Georgia. "It met my expectations, yes. We interviewed lots of people affected by the Creek – they're cleaning it up or they're creek riders in canoes or from the Partnership for the Creek or they were affected by the sewage treatment facility. We just gathered these stories. The interviewing part and interacting with different people will help me as an actor. I did the voice-over narration. It's a different way of story-telling. It made me think about art and how it's used in community and the interviewing and interacting with different kinds of people helps me as an actor."

"I was searching for something outside my major but still art-related and dealing with critical issues like the environment plus I don't get to work with sound much," said sophomore film studies major Stefani Quam, originally from Milwaukee but now from Los Angeles when she's not here. "My partner and I interviewed people from the Southwest Community neighborhood in the first project and we decided we'd stick to that location. I was surprised to learn how the city treats its waterways and how that affects its poorer communities. I'd never attached those issues so it was a wake-up call to me."

"I've thought a lot about the issues in this course, especially environmental justice," said Eduard Tabaku, a sophomore video arts major from Washington, DC. "I want to make art that has strong social implications – not just art for art's sake. Art has always been closely connected to social and political change. I have a

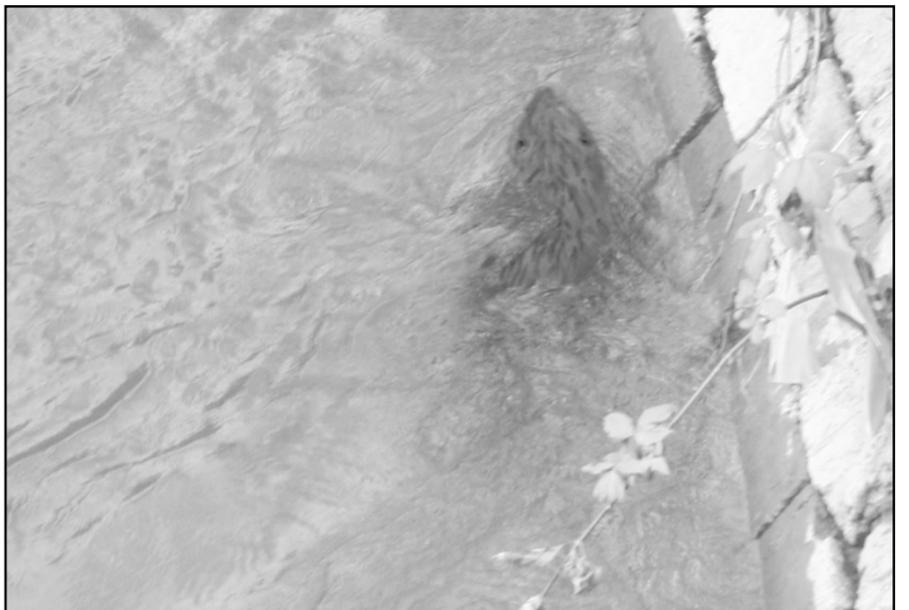


ELLEN LEAHY

This is Onondaga Creek off the bridge at Midland Street. The creek is essentially lined with chainlink fence all the way to Armory Square. What's that all about?

double major in video and geography so after learning about the Creek I felt compelled to do something hands on with efforts to revitalize the Creek, something effective and just for the people who've lived with what was largely an open sewer system and now some have been evicted. The sound walk makes these issues more digestible. I don't pay much attention to sound so I wanted to work with the relationship between image and sound. Now that I'm working strictly with sound I see how much you can drive a piece sonically."

Can't get to Redhouse or Southwest? MP3 versions of the sound walks posted on May 9th at *Up the Creek's* Web site, 315water.blogspot.com, along with already extensive links, photos & audio clips. Learn more about artist Fereshteh Toosi at Fereshteh.net. We'll re-visit *Up the Creek* in July when Toosi's own sound walk installation completes the project. Nancy covers the arts. Reach her at nancykeefe-rhodes@gmail.com.



ELLEN LEAHY

You be the judge: Is this a beaver or a muskrat? The furry critter was taking a swim near the Walton Street Bridge in Armory Square Wednesday Morning May 7.