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Swarthmore professor Carr Everbach leads a workshop with North Philadelphia community members about solar panels and solar energy at Serenity House, a community center in North Philadelphia, 2014. Image courtesy of Serenity Soular.

Serenity Soular Captures the Power of the Sun and Community

Max Katz-Balmes

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Students join with North Philadelphia community to solarize arts nonprofit

While spring break offered many Swarthmore students a well-deserved rest following midterm season, six students from the [Serenity Soular](#) project were working hard to bring environmental justice to North Philadelphia, a low-income but culturally rich community in the heart of the city.

Founded in 2012, Serenity Soular is a collaborative project between North Philadelphia community members and Swarthmore students and faculty that aims to make solar energy affordable for low-income households in North Philadelphia, train local residents for existing solar jobs, and provide new solar jobs in the community. Jobs and low costs are vital to low-

income, disinvested neighborhoods like North Philadelphia, and it is important to support the efforts of organizations such as Serenity Soular that are fighting to rejuvenate these communities from within.

Serenity Soular is a unique group on campus in that it engages students to apply academic theories of environmentalism, social justice, and community activism learned in the classroom to practical action in the surrounding communities. I joined Serenity Soular last semester, and it has been the most powerful part of my Swarthmore experience. I have met influential community activists who are working to revitalize North Philadelphia, I have joined a national movement for environmental justice, and I have found a way to link my academic experience to my passion for community activism.

Historically, poor, urban minority communities such as North Philadelphia have been excluded from the mainstream environmental movement. Large environmental organizations, like the Sierra Club, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and Audubon International, tend to focus on preserving nature and the great outdoors and often fail to recognize that the “environment” also includes where we live and work — urban areas.

The Serenity Soular project pushes the mainstream concept of the environment — which Robert Garcia, founding director and counsel for the City Project, characterizes as not focusing on the needs of people — and brings minority voices to the environmentalist conversation at Swarthmore and in the larger Philadelphia area. We recognize that diversifying the environmental movement combats structural racism and other inequalities, in addition to building coalitions that add credibility to the work of mainstream environmentalists.

For the past three years, we have partnered with [RE-volv](#), a solar financing nonprofit based in San Francisco. RE-volv provides a crowdfunding platform for communities to raise the funds needed to cover the upfront costs of installing solar panels on nonprofit organizations. RE-volv focuses on nonprofits because they are not eligible for tax rebates when going solar. However, RE-volv is not simply a crowdfunding site. When a person donates to a RE-volv crowdfunding campaign their money is eventually reinvested in future solar projects through a revolving “Solar Seed” fund.

This revolving fund works as follows: although nonprofits pay no upfront costs for the solar panels, they gradually pay back the cost of the panels through lease payments, which are reinvested into solar projects across the country.

In collaboration with RE-volv, Serenity Soular has successfully crowdfunded for solar arrays to be placed on the roofs of two nonprofits, Serenity House and Morris Chapel Baptist Church. Last year, we worked to bring solar power to Morris Chapel, a community center and place of worship in North Philadelphia. We raised over \$29,000 to pay for the panels and fund the solar installation training of two North Philadelphia residents. These solar apprentices were able to learn from and receive hands-on experience working with industry professionals. One of the 2017 apprentices secured an internship with the Philadelphia Energy Authority, and Serenity Soular continues to support both apprentices in building careers in the green economy.

Serenity Soular's apprenticeship program highlights that the organization is not simply focused on environmentalism. We also strive to empower residents, help them find jobs, and build human capital within the community. In other words, Serenity Soular is an organization that works to nurture the soul of the community — hence the name Serenity SOUL-ar — which can be important in healing the divisions between people in North Philadelphia and in other communities across the country, including at Swarthmore.

In addition to the apprenticeship program, Serenity Soular organizes many events to build community in North Philadelphia.

"By listening to the community's voices and desires, the collaboration has together organized public events, to work in the garden, spark community conversation, and celebrate Mother's Day," states Serenity Soular member and Swarthmore alumnus Laura Rigell '16.

On March 23rd, Serenity Soular continued to support environmental justice in North Philadelphia with the launch of another [crowdfunding campaign](#) to solarize [The Village of Arts and Humanities](#), an organization that supports arts and culture in North Philadelphia. This campaign is of the utmost importance because it will continue the campaign to "green" a community that has historically had little involvement in the environmental movement.

However, our collaboration with the Village will do more than green North Philadelphia. By creating links between Swarthmore, Serenity Soular, The Village, and other nonprofits in North Philadelphia, we are setting a precedent of powerful community-campus partnerships that are able to draw upon the technological skill sets of academics in addition to the organizing and more human-oriented expertise of community members. Utilizing all of the available skill sets strengthens social movements by reducing the distrust of academia in many communities and mobilizing broader populations to action.

In other words, the nature of Serenity Soular's partnership with both Swarthmore and North Philadelphia is changing the relationship between academia and low-income, minority

communities. Through our work, we are attempting to break the cycle of short-term “white savior” research projects in underserved communities. With no clearly defined leadership structure and equal voting power, we guarantee that all Serenity Soular community members have equal say in the organization’s direction. Instead of having a single leader, everyone holds everyone else accountable, and members take up leadership roles on a rotating basis. This structure allows everyone to step up when they are comfortable and step back when they need to, while ensuring that tasks are accomplished correctly and on time.

Our community events and apprenticeship program also demonstrate that we are invested in the long-term success of North Philadelphia and ensure that we are respected and working to make change in North Philadelphia.

We share our vision for North Philadelphia with The Village. Like Serenity Soular, The Village empowers local residents to reclaim and revitalize their own community.

According to Maggie Mejia-Rabell, The Village’s community economic development director, The Village’s mission is “to support the voices and aspirations of our residents through a process that is rooted in arts and culture.”

After Serenity Soular raises the \$37,000 needed to solarize The Village, Solar States, a local solar installation company, will install a solar array on The Village’s roof. This installation will save The Village money by reducing the organization’s non-renewable energy usage by over 72 percent, while preventing 27,000 pounds of carbon dioxide from entering the atmosphere annually.

When asked what the panels will do for The Village, Jonny Hopkins, the organization’s environmental director, explained, “It’s going to free up a lot of capital ... that will bring more programming and better offerings to our students and to the community at large. So we’re very excited about it.”

In addition to saving The Village money and bringing clean energy to North Philadelphia, Serenity Soular will continue to support community members in gaining experience for jobs in the green economy this spring by creating a local green jobs database, providing resources for apprenticeships, and hosting workshops for local residents.

The benefits of our project will not be contained in North Philadelphia. As we build connections in North Philadelphia, we serve the entire Swarthmore campus community by providing students interested not only in sustainability, but also in arts and culture, social justice, religion

and more, with opportunities to turn their classroom experiences into practical action in collaboration with North Philadelphia community members and organizations.

Although Serenity Soular hopes to continue to solarize North Philadelphia in partnership with RE-volv, the organization eventually aims to become an independent, full-fledged solar installation business employing North Philadelphia residents to install solar panels throughout the community. A locally owned, locally staffed, locally supported solar installation company would provide the community with true and just sustainability. This company would be environmentally friendly, would support the North Philadelphia community economically, and would place the disinvested community at the forefront of the traditionally white environmental movement.

You can watch the crowdfunding video and donate to the campaign on [RE-volv's website](#).

Max Katz-Balmes attends Swarthmore (Class of 2020), majoring in Environmental Studies and Economics.

The MAHB Blog is a venture of the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere.
Questions should be directed to joan@mahbonline.org

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