



## EXPOSED

# Adam Wilson

CO-FOUNDER &amp; DIRECTOR OF GRIFFIN SCHOOL

**H**ow does a drab concrete wall overlooking Shipe Pool in Hyde Park transform into a shiny mosaic of a summer day? The answer lies in collaboration at its best—with devoted neighbors, visionary artists, the Griffin School art department, and a stolen bike all playing their part. Adam Wilson, director of Griffin School and member of the Friends of Shipe Park neighborhood group, sparked the idea for this whimsical transformation with Pascal Simon, a Griffin School mosaic-art teacher. A few years later, we see fantastical flowers and guitar-playing, bubble-blowing silhouettes all out making the most of a day in the park.

Wilson has a talent for transforming blank slates into things treasured

by the community at large. Just four years after he moved to Austin in 1992, he founded the Griffin School, one of Austin's most respected private high schools, with a posse of like-minded teachers and educators.

"I was just a young teacher who got connected with a handful of other teachers, and we had the right kind dynamic to make the Griffin School happen," said Wilson on a recent morning at Dolce Vita Gelato & Espresso Bar, pausing regularly to wave to neighbors. "None of us would have done it on our own. There is something in that group dynamic that leads to interesting things happening."

Wilson's involvement with the Friends of Shipe Park neighborhood group was born of a mishap. Several summers ago, Wilson, who lives catty-corner from Shipe Park, went on a bike ride and then stopped off to meet his family for a swim. He walked home with his wife and two boys, leaving the bike behind. By the next morning, the bike was gone, so he posted a notice on the neighborhood listserv.

Meanwhile, neighborhood community-building powerhouse Deaton Bednar, the organizer behind the Fire Station Festival that the neighborhood association hosts each fall, was organizing a Shipe Park group in response to several neighbors' interest in taking care of the park. To get the ball rolling, she searched the Hyde Park listserv for anyone who had written anything about Shipe with the intention of inviting them to an informal coffee at her house, and voilà!—Adam Wilson's bike theft post popped up. He attended the gathering and has been part of the group ever since.

"It's pretty simple—I live right across the street from the park, so I felt a certain responsibility to help be a part of maintaining it," he says.

A big issue this group has taken on has been a fight to keep the pool open. In 2011, the city put Shipe on a list of pools recommended to be closed in order to deal with the 2012 budget crisis. Council member Laura Morrison's resolution to keep the pools open succeeded, but now the possibility of closure has resurfaced, again due to budget constraints. The Parks and Recreation Department is presently working on a citywide master plan that could close the smaller neighborhood pools in favor of large new regional aquatics centers. Thus the fate of Shipe Pool is uncertain once again.

"I think neighborhood pools are critically important to quality of life, particularly for these central-city neighborhoods," says Wilson. "Either we preserve historical neighborhoods and their green spaces and pools so they are still livable, or we abandon them—which will likely result in even more families moving out to the suburban areas."

One of the happiest parts of Wilson's role with Friends of Shipe Park is throwing the annual Shipe Pool Party. This year's event—the sixth annual—will be held on Saturday, July 12, from 7 to 11 pm. For this midsummer family frolic, they keep the pool open late, bring in food vendors, and show a movie in the adjacent field. Neighbors come to help, feast, swim, and play. With the City of Austin's aquatics assessment due out this month, the organization will be advocating for neighborhood pools like Shipe to secure their place in the master plan. **C. MAXWELL**

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## 8 QUESTIONS FOR ADAM

*How did you get the idea to create the Shipe Park mural?*

The very early seed came from Pascal and me because she was teaching mosaic design at the Griffin School. It felt like such an obvious place to do something really beautiful, so we started talking to Holli about it—she's an artistic visionary, plus she facilitated the community glass mosaic days that we had so people could come work on it. At first we were just thinking a three-foot-tall rectangle, but then we decided to go for it and do the whole wall. We got a grant from Austin Parks Foundation and did a lot of individual fund-raising in the neighborhood. We raised \$42,000 to make it happen.

*I know the Griffin School students did a lot of the work for the mural and they also help out in the neighborhood in other ways. Why is that kind of involvement important for your students?*

Everyone needs to develop a sense of civic responsibility, and the easiest way to make that feel relevant is to get involved in your immediate community. This helps kids grow into adults who feel like they can have a positive impact on people right around them, and hopefully you can extend that wider. Teenagers have kind of a bad rap in the world, and it's important for the community to see that they can be valuable members of the community who have a lot to offer in making the world a better place.

*Your neighborhood has many fun celebrations, but there are also the less-fun aspects of neighborhood organizing, like code compliance and historic preservation. What are keys for navigating the hard part of involvement?*

When you're working with neighborhood groups, people are inherently invested in the issues, which is why there is so much heat about it. It hits people right in their home. It comes with a danger of people getting so passionate that they start to personalize all of their disagreements, and then you get resentments building between neighbors. We try to make sure that our starting place is the desire to build a strong sense of community; we know we're going to disagree on issues, but that's okay as long as we don't lose sight of the community.

*Do you think people shy away from involvement because they are afraid of the sticky issues?*

Yes, a lot of people want to avoid conflict. But when people don't get involved, it only leads to more distrust and resentment. What solves that is when people come and sit at the table together; then they see that the dialogue is mostly coming out of people's passions for making their neighborhood a better place. When people come out for It's My Park Day to spread Dillo Dirt and they're working side by side with people who might have very different ideas about something like short-term rentals, they find they can still come out thinking, "Hey, I can work with this person."

*What are some of your favorite things about your neighborhood?*

I love this little center where we're sitting—a couple of coffee shops, restaurants, a Laundromat, a

neighborhood grocery store. I see my neighbors at Fresh Plus every day. I love our common green space. At Shipe, people are bonding in ways that are critically important. I think Hyde Park has a level of engagement among its residents that is remarkable. We all have busy lives, yet there's this real commitment to the common experiences we can have together in the neighborhood.

*On the Griffin School website, you say that one of your favorite quotes is "Work is love made visible" (Kahlil Gibran). How does that apply to your neighborhood involvement, both as an individual and as director of the Griffin School?*

Being involved with Shipe and the Griffin School sometimes means work that is dirty and hard . . . and sometimes it's political, like fund-raising—all this stuff that you could complain about having to do. But for me it's been an experience of really bonding with people who become deep and lasting friends.

*What do you love to do at the pool?*

What I mostly do at the pool is go to the deep end and, well, it's not really even swimming. It's mostly just a float...looking up at the trees and the sky, a kind of sensory deprivation. That's definitely my moment of bliss in the summertime.

*You live close to the pool. Do you ever hear people swimming at night?*

All the time. My bedroom window is above the treetops, on the second story of our house, so the sound of people splashing in the pool happens all the time. It's kind of lovely. I know how that feels—those epic moments. A little sense of danger, a lot of fun, fully alive.