Community Engagement

TREE CITY USA® BULLETIN

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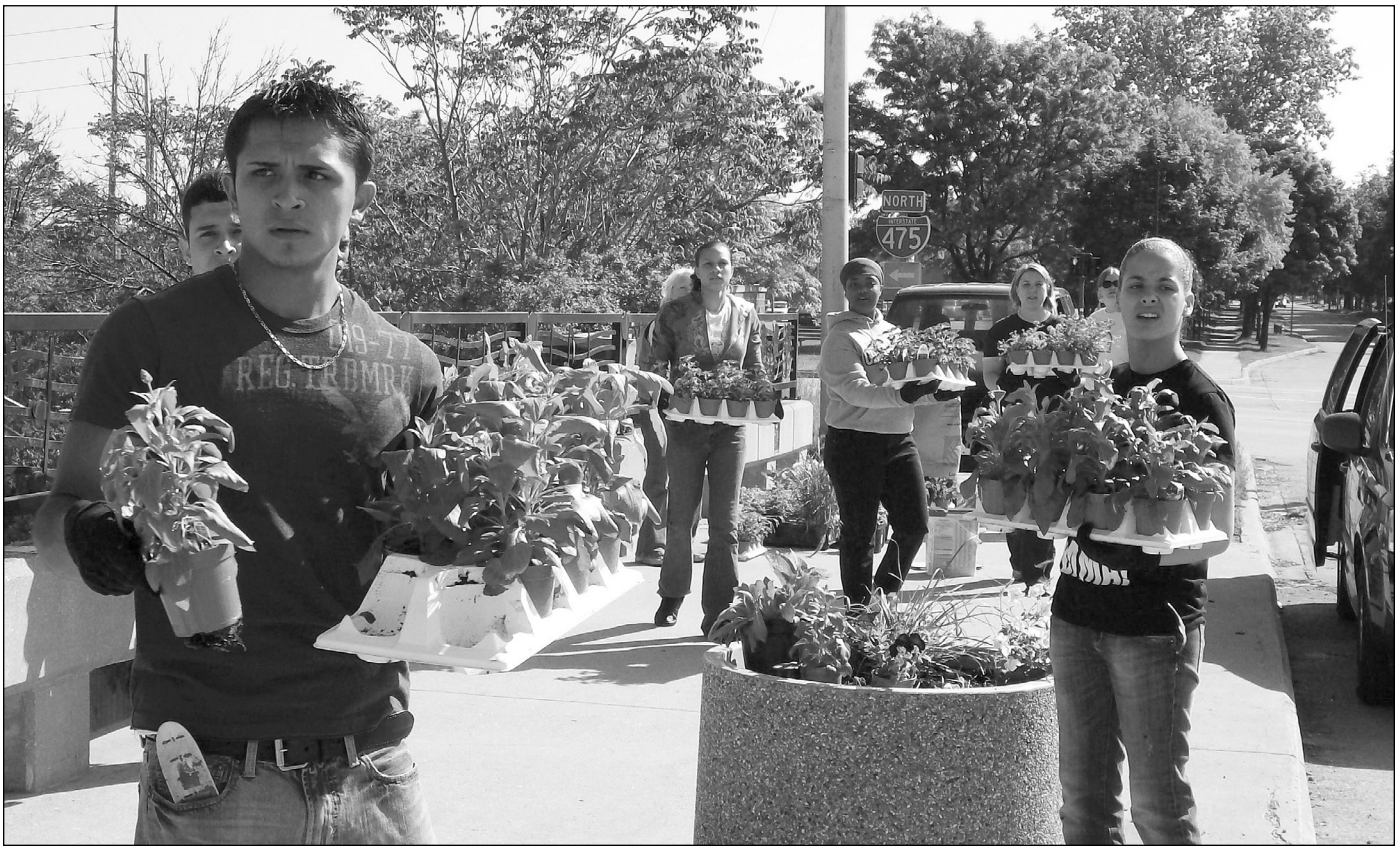
"No man is an island," and neither is anyone who wants to initiate or improve community forestry. Success today depends on collaboration and partnerships. Engaging others is essential for tree boards, city foresters, or any individual or group that champions the cause of tree planting and care.

According to the dictionary, "collaboration" comes from the ancient Greek word *koll* or *kollo*, meaning glue. In later Latin, *collaborare* gave us the meaning we still use: to labor together, to work jointly with others, or to cooperate. For urban forestry to be accepted and embraced, collaboration and community engagement are as important as trees themselves. They are the foundation for action and sustainability.

Conversely, when the glue of collaboration is absent from any project, the result is loss of valuable insights, financial support, and helping hands. It may even bring forth the fruits of resentment and hostility. Perhaps even more importantly, the opportunity to build ownership and pride in the community's green landscape is lost.

The United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines community engagement as the process of "working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people." The urban forestry community can learn much about this process from the older field of public health. Some of this experience is presented on the next pages of the bulletin. Then, too, there is the observation of the CDC that engaging the community can be "difficult and labor-intensive." In the examples of collaboration and engagement that follow, colleagues in urban forestry attest to the truth of this statement. At the same time, all agree that the extra effort is worthwhile.



Keep America Beautiful Inc., (KAB) knows the value of community engagement as it strives to create nature-rich green spaces throughout the nation. Shown here is Keep Genesee County Beautiful, a KAB affiliate in Flint, Michigan, involving young people in a special planting in the city.

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The Theory of Engagement

Most advocates for urban forestry are action-oriented people. Conceptual ideas don't turn the crank! Actually planting trees or instructing others about things like tree preservation or hazard reduction are more to their liking. However, in order to get entire communities engaged in what we know to be good urban forestry, an overview of some findings from social science may be helpful. Applying this, or borrowing ideas from examples in the following pages, will differ depending on your circumstances. However, Randy Gordon, former program manager for the Arbor Day Foundation, observed, "the concept of using engagement tools to advance a project, program, or plan can be employed by everyone from a city forester or commercial arborist to interested citizens with a passion for trees."

Articulate the 'Messaging Triangle'

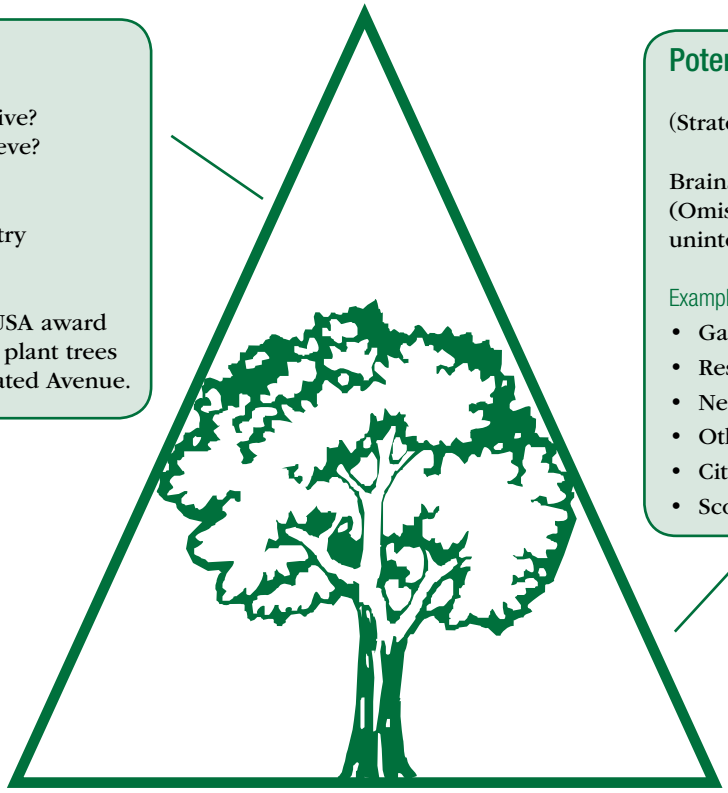
All action begins with an idea. Knowing in your own mind or within your organization what you want to achieve is one thing, and it is an important start. However, being able to clearly express it before you begin working on a campaign to achieve it will help ensure success. Paul Ries, Oregon's urban & community forestry coordinator, uses the messaging triangle to do this. In short, each side of the triangle is essential, so be able to define exactly what these are in your case.

The Message:

What is your goal or objective?
What is it you want to achieve?
Write it down.

NOT: To improve urban forestry
(Too general)

BETTER: To gain a Tree City USA award for my city or to obtain and plant trees where none exist on Sylvacated Avenue.



Potential Partners

(Strategic individuals or groups)

Brainstorm and make a list.
(Omissions can lead to unintended offense)

Examples:

- Garden Club
- Respected city council member
- Neighborhood associations
- Other environmental NGOs
- City official responsible for trees
- Scouts or youth organizations

The Communication – *Delivering the Message*

Create a plan, including who will contact the potential partners, the best approach (phone, email, face-to-face, letters), an effective appeal (such as mutual benefits or the need for help), and a timetable.

Community engagement is a blend of social science and art. The science comes from sociology, political science, cultural anthropology, organizational development, psychology, social work, and other disciplines ... the equally important artistic element necessary to the process involves using understanding, skill, and sensitivity to apply and adapt the science in ways that fit the community and purposes of the engagement efforts.

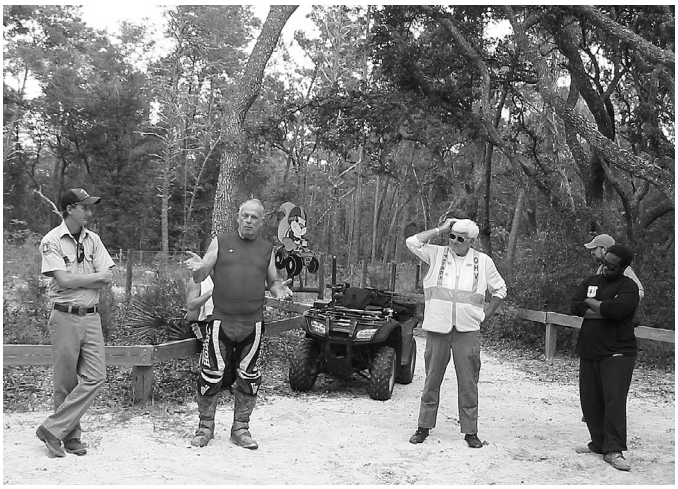
– Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Suggestions from Experience and Research

A committee within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services drew upon years of experience and the results of scientific studies to develop a series of principles for effective community engagement. The following are adapted from that list:

✓ **Be clear about your purpose.** Who should be engaged? Basically, complete the elements of the messaging triangle shown on page 2.

✓ **Know your community**. For example, how much has already been presented about urban forestry or other things relative to your project? Perceived benefits and costs are always an important issue, so how will these be addressed? Who are the opinion leaders or other influential individuals? How is business done, i.e., how have other successful efforts been done in the past?



Successfully engaging other groups first requires identifying those with common interests and then understanding and respecting differences as you work toward mutually beneficial outcomes.

Recognition of partners is important for building long-lasting rapport. Awards, media publicity, and always sharing the credit are elements of successful community engagement.

✓ **Establish relationships, trust, and involvement.** Ideally, you or someone in your group will already have good rapport with a formal or informal leader in the potential partner group(s). Otherwise, start with the key individuals. Contacts and presentations should be done in their surroundings, not yours. Be respectful and clearly show how your goals align with their interests.

✓ **Let partners develop ownership.** This means engaging your partners early in the process. Let them help identify the problems or issues. Discuss the barriers openly. In other words, share planning with your partners so they feel that the project is truly theirs as well as yours. A result should be their awareness that they have something real to contribute and something to gain.

✓ **Consider diversity.** Engagement of every kind of diversity is rarely possible, but plans for inclusion should consider:

- Educational levels
- Economic strata
- Employment fields
- Ethnicity
- Religion
- Affinity groups (fraternal organizations, clubs, interest groups)

Be sensitive to the fact that each group may require a different approach to the engagement process and may want to use different strategies or techniques for working with you toward the common outcome.

✓ **Build capacity.** Some partners may be unfamiliar with even the basics of tree planting, Arbor Day ceremonies, or other aspects of your project. Be a resource to help them learn. Train leaders, lead a special meeting or workshop, provide literature, and essentially help them expand their knowledge and skills.

✓ **Give credit — abundantly.** By all means, go out of your way to give credit at all public events and/or in print. Write (don't call or text message) expressions of thanks.

✓ **Nurture your contacts and involvement with partners between projects.**

Help partners gain a better understanding of urban forestry and a clear understanding about your project or goals. Depending on the group and circumstances, this may require field trips, workshops, literature, or other capacity-building techniques.

Starting a New Urban Forestry Program

The idea of urban or community forestry is still new to many people. Creating recognition for a communitywide, systematic tree care program is a challenge and one that was met successfully by a young forester in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

A Pioneering Effort

Nick Kuhn had an interesting challenge in 2006. He was hired as Albuquerque's first urban forester, brought there by a mayor who was a champion for trees and conservation. During his six-year tenure, Kuhn built significant public recognition for his program and for urban forestry in general. For Kuhn, it was his second pioneering effort. He had previously been the first urban forester in McMinnville, Tennessee. In Albuquerque, he built on what he learned in McMinnville, and we share here some of the techniques he used to engage the community in his programs.

Attention and Action Through Tree Give-Aways

Awareness is the first step toward support and engagement. Kuhn did this by setting up seedling give-away events throughout the city. Some were in target neighborhoods; others were at parks, the city's science center or in conjunction with seemingly unrelated events, such as Dog Adoption Day at the animal shelter or a 5k fun run. Three components of these events made them successful:

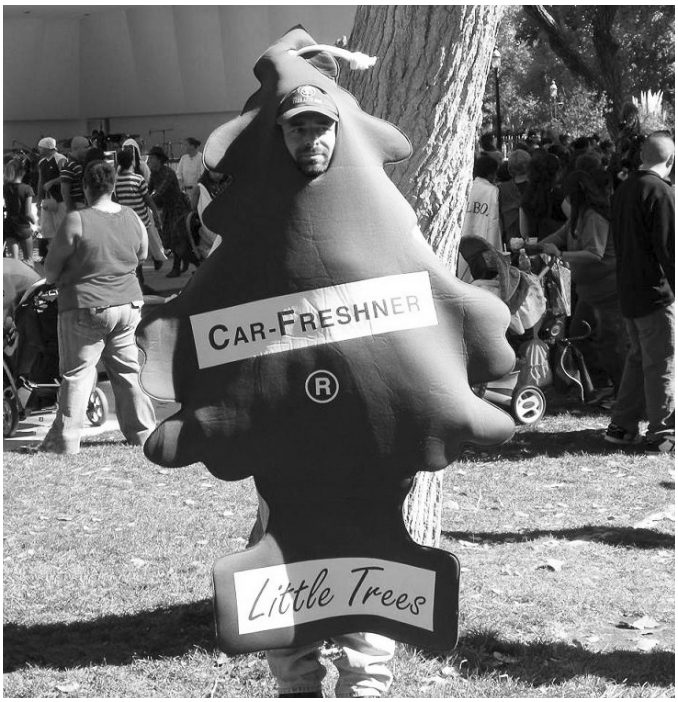
- Species were selected that met a local need, including long periods of little or no rainfall.
- The events were well–publicized through local media and the city website.
- The goals included education, not just getting more trees planted.

At each event, Kuhn and his crew circulated among the people lined up to receive trees and talked to them about the city forest, the importance of species diversity, and tree care. A printed handout accompanied each tree and a special packet of material was available for any teachers present. Between 5,000 and 7,000 seedlings were distributed in this manner each year, a nice supplement to the city's goal of 2,000 large-caliper trees planted annually on city streets and in the parks.

Connecting With Others

To acquaint others with the relatively new concept of urban forestry, Kuhn was proactive in making himself available as a speaker. The result was that he spoke at Cooperative Extension events, a home and garden show, the New Mexico Xeriscape Conference, Master Gardeners, the Native Plant Society, and many others. "I'd go to teach," Kuhn said. "I even went to solar and wind power events to show how trees could work with these programs if we would talk and plan together." He also worked in partnership with Lance Davisson, who at the time was New Mexico's urban and community forestry program manager. "Lance had good connections and got me involved with larger groups, like the New Mexico Municipal League. This helped give more credibility to my program," Kuhn said.

It requires aggressive action to make a new program known. In Kuhn's case, this was a priority in establishing urban forestry in Albuquerque. He summed it up saying, "I participated as widely as I could. It created extra work, but it also sped up the process of gaining support. But you do have to have a lot of energy!"



City forester Nick Kuhn would don this outfit at Arbor Day events, tree give-aways, and other times when children would be present. Sometimes another staff person dressed as Johnny Appleseed. The attention-getting costume provided a good way to begin presenting information about the benefits and needs of trees.

Thanks to good publicity and selection of sites that corresponded with other events, spring and fall tree give-aways were popular in Albuquerque. Shari Griffin (right) of Tree New Mexico, a statewide nonprofit, regularly partnered with the city at these events. Thousands of containerized trees were given away at each event along with instructions about planting and care.

A 'Firecracker' Can Help Get Things Started

Anthropologist Margaret Mead said, "Never believe that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Susan Di Biase and her friends are doing just that in their little corner of the world — and their efforts provide an example for others.

Michelle Cole, extension specialist at Auburn University, admires individuals who make things happen. She even has an annual award in their honor — "Firecracker of the Year." Good things happen for urban forestry when such people have an idea and engage their communities to turn it into action. Susan Di Biase of Jacksonville, Alabama, is such a person. She is not a forester or arborist by background, but rather a retired community health nurse and currently a cello teacher. Here are some of the achievements this "firecracker" helped make possible and how they were done through community engagement.

First Comes Tree City USA

As a framework for action, Jacksonville (population 12,484) passed a tree ordinance, created a tree commission, and celebrated Arbor Day to become a Tree City USA in the spring of 2009. Di Biase is a member of the five-person commission and is proud of the projects already sponsored by her group, many of which were made possible by including many other groups. For example, Arbor Days include the Garden Club, a color guard provided by the Boy Scouts, city officials, college students, and of course, enthusiastic tree commission members. Cooperative Extension also helps with advice on species selection and sources of planting stock. "But how do you reach out to artistic kids?" Di Biase wondered. She found the answer in the Jacksonville State University's Writers' Club. She asked that a poem contest be conducted for Arbor Day and that the winning student receive a gift certificate from the tree commission for his or her winning entry. Even the certificate was a partnership effort; it was donated by the Java Jolt Coffee Shop.

"Firecracker" Susan Di Biase (far right) with (from left) Ken Mattox, Dora Mattox, and Garden Club volunteer Klaus Duncan. Jacksonville's efforts on behalf of trees are an outstanding example of how different groups can work together productively for the good of the community.

Arbor Day at Jacksonville State University. Students (left to right) Charles Dixon, Jonathan Beason, and Tory Green of the Student Government Association and Lindsey Cochran, Earth Club vice president, do the tree-planting honors.

Tree Campus USA

The proximity of Jacksonville State and the involvement of some of its professors in the tree commission led to another project. Why not encourage the university to become the state's second Tree Campus USA? Di Biase said, "It helped that the grounds crew does an excellent job, and President Bill Meehan is on record as saying that for every tree that must be taken down, he wants to plant 10 more." To help the university move toward meeting the requirements to become a Tree Campus USA, the tree commission worked with the Student Government Association and the Earth Club to have its members participate in tree-planting projects on campus, at a local skate board park, and at Myrick Manor, a public housing area for senior citizens. The opportunity for students to provide service is one of the requirements for a school to be recognized for the Tree Campus USA honor.

A Street Project

Jacksonville's A Street was once lined with tall, beautiful trees. As happens in so many places, the trees were felled when the street was widened. However, one of the original trees was left standing in the yard of longtime resident Dora Mattox, who says that the giant water oak was there when she was born. It so happens that the Jacksonville Garden Club has a unique way of drawing attention to outstanding trees. They select one for a Tree of Distinction award, not just annually, but in each season of the year. Mattox's tree was selected for the honor, and in turn she made a donation that helped fund the long overdue replanting of A Street. The resulting planting project brought together the tree commission, the Garden Club, Boy Scouts, and neighbors.

Full Engagement for Street Tree Plantings

The New Jersey Tree Foundation was founded in 1998. It is a statewide nonprofit organization dedicated to planting trees in New Jersey's most underserved neighborhoods. The goal is to use tree planting, volunteerism, and partnerships to help improve the environment and quality of life for residents. Of its many programs, the Urban Airshed Reforestation program stands out as the epitome of community engagement at the neighborhood level.

Volunteers assist local residents in transforming a treeless street into one that is cleaner, greener, and healthier. Through careful planning and following a proven process, scenes like these have been repeated hundreds of times in Camden and with a survival rate of nearly 100 percent.

Urban Airshed Reforestation Program

This program began in 2002 with money from a utility to help improve the air and water quality in Camden, New Jersey. It was intended as a three-year program but has been so successful that it continues today and keeps growing. A key to its success is exemplary involvement of the people who will be served by the projects. In this case, the projects are designed to convert treeless streets into shaded neighborhoods where residents can interact productively and take pride in their local environment. This is no small task in a city that sometimes leads the nation in crime statistics and where two of every five residents live below the poverty level.

What is particularly striking is the program's cardinal principle that the residents must take the leadership and do the work themselves.

The Process

PUBLICITY

Residents of a street must initiate the process. But they must first know about the possibilities, so an outreach effort is part of the Foundation's work. Local newspapers and a mailing list of schools and churches are used, but so is leg work with explanatory fliers placed at doors in target neighborhoods.

APPLICATION

All it takes is one resident to come forth to begin a planting project. Whoever expresses an interest — referred to as "the applicant" — is invited to a mandatory applicants' meeting. There, the Foundation's mission and history are explained, before-and-after photos from previous projects are shown, and roles and responsibilities are clearly laid out. To help even more, each applicant receives a detailed, 20-page Camden Community Tree Planting Training Manual.

GAINING INTEREST

It is then the applicant's responsibility to go door to door with a flier (printed in English and Spanish) and make sure that every resident on the block knows of the project and has the opportunity to fill out a form requesting that a tree be planted at his/her address. The form also explains what is needed in the way of helping to plant the tree, and it elicits an agreement that the resident will provide care for the tree for at least two years. Ten such agreements must be obtained from residents on a block in order for the project to move forward.

These requirements place responsibility squarely on the people who will ultimately benefit from the trees. Even the task of garnering participants can provide benefits and be a rewarding experience in its own right. One applicant later wrote to the Foundation, "I went door to door like you said and I already have 11 signatures on my block! Pretty sure we might get two more. Listen, I have lived here for so many years but I hardly knew most of my neighbors. I'd see them come and go, and they seemed nice, but we really never had a reason to talk until the trees. They are so excited and so am I. We already have been talking more, and I know we can do so much good on our block if we work together."

Arbor Day plays an important role in the New Jersey Tree Foundation's calendar of events. The organization's leadership states, "The success of the Celebrate Arbor Day program is measured not just in the number of trees planted each year, but in the creative partnerships formed within recipient communities." The partnership here is with the Alliance for the Disabled in Action.

THE COMMUNITY MEETING

The applicant decides where and when the meeting will be held — usually at a home, park, or church. This meeting is hosted by the applicant or neighbors, but the Foundation's program director attends and talks about the importance of trees, the species that will be planted, and what will happen on planting day. Normally, about 75 percent of the affected neighbors show up for this meeting. All are invited to an optional series of four workshops to become certified Camden TreeKeepers. The Camden TreeKeepers sessions are free of charge, and complimentary tools and training are provided. The Foundation recommends at least one person from every block attend these sessions to serve as a resource to their community. Hundreds of residents have attended the TreeKeeper sessions, with more than 150 of the participants now certified. This group of tree enthusiasts meets often throughout the seasons to prune, mulch, and care for trees throughout Camden.

Importantly, at the community meeting the Foundation also shares information about other social organizations that might be of help to the urban residents. Jessica Franzini, program director, says, "The point is that we try to create leaders and to connect them to others — garden groups, a nonprofit that helps people paint houses, revitalization organizations. We want to create overlap." To help form these additional partnerships, Franzini makes an effort to attend meetings of pertinent groups, join their committees, and become involved with them.

For more information

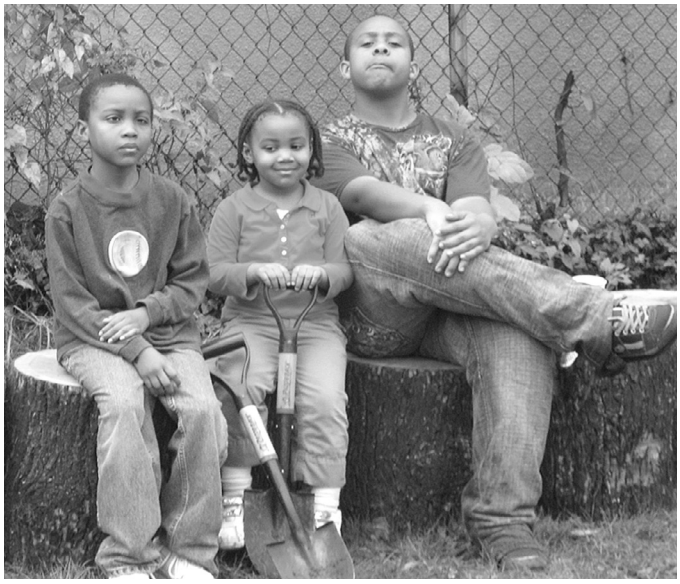
For a link to the New Jersey Tree Foundation's annual report and other sources of additional information about community engagement, please visit **arborday.org/bulletins** and click on Bulletin No. 58.

THE PLANTING EVENT AND OTHER PAYOFFS

The Foundation takes care of checking for underground utilities, selecting the right tree for the right place, and contracting for sidewalk concrete cutting. The rest is up to residents on the block, with supervision and guidance from the Foundation. On planting day, the residents do the work along with any friends, relatives, or other volunteers they recruit. The elderly and physically challenged receive assistance from volunteers. The work takes place on Saturday mornings and ceremonies are not included. It is all work — almost. The applicant can arrange for refreshments, a block party, a barbecue, or anything else that brings together the workers and other neighbors. Franzini says, "Everyone comes out, even those who don't plant a tree. It gives everyone a sense of ownership."

Thousands of trees have been planted as a result of the Urban Airshed Reforestation program. This helps cool the streets, clean the air, retain rainwater, and provide all the other benefits of trees where few or none existed before. There has been a 95 percent survival rate, and the neighbors are fiercely proud and protective of their trees. Moreover, neighbors know each other better, they communicate, and they watch out for each other better. Said one resident, "I look back on how much my neighborhood has changed, and I can honestly say it all started with the trees."

> " Everyone comes out, even those who don't plant a tree. It gives everyone a sense of ownership."
>
> *– Jessica Franzini*



Tree stumps for resting benches were provided at a community vegetable garden by Tree Tech, a local tree care company. This was part of the Newark Renaissance Trees Program, a partnership that includes the New Jersey Tree Foundation, the City of Newark, and Prodigal Sons & Daughters. Local children did the work on this project, creating the garden out of a litter-strewn vacant lot.

A Checklist for Good PR

The practice of public relations has been defined as the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the various publics on whom its success or failure depends. How well does your organization use the following nine principles that can lead to good public relations?

- ☑ Accept the fact that good public relations is a prerequisite to the success of a project and the sustainability of urban forestry.
- ☑ Every action makes an impression, so use this to work for you, not against you.
- ☑ Ethics must be a part of every action.
- ☑ There is no such thing as "the" public; recognize that many publics (also called audiences, demographic segments, etc.) are or should be associated with your efforts.
- ☑ Engage your publics — honestly and effectively.
- ☑ Be on the public relations offense, not defense.
- ☑ *Plan* for public relations just as you plan other aspects of any project.
- ☑ Work *with* the media and remember that they don't work for you.
- ☑ Communicate!

Community engagement should include the next generation of tree stewards, whenever possible.

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