

THE ROOTS OF A MOVEMENT

Alliance for Community Trees

a historic reunion



Acknowledgments

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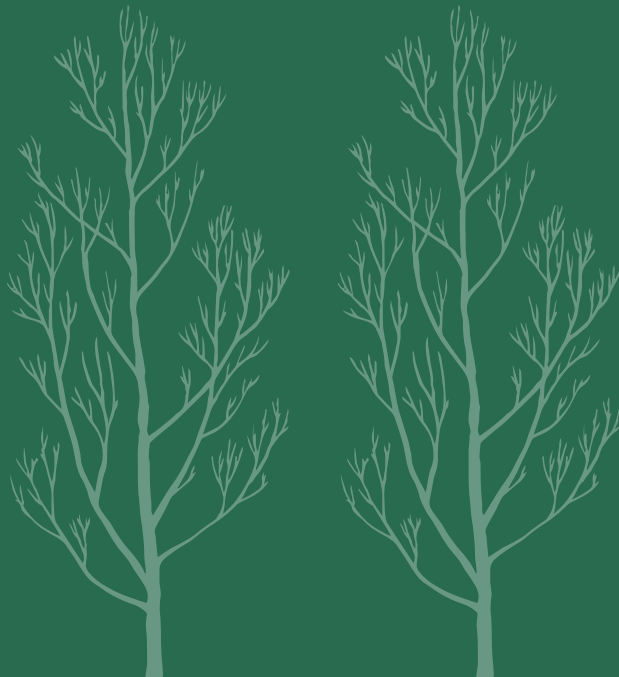
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Funding for Digital Production

Accelerate Resilience LA
Ray Tretheway
Marcia Bansley
Friends and Participants

A number of founders and early leaders were unable to attend the reunion, yet many of those who helped create the Alliance for Community Trees joined through shared enthusiasm, energy and spirit.

Images in this report were generously shared by Accelerate Resilience (Los Angeles, CA), Trees Atlanta (GA), TreePeople (Los Angeles, CA), Friends of the Urban Forest (San Francisco, CA), Trees Forever (Marion, IA), New York Releaf & Leslie Kameny (New York City).



Introduction

Urban and community forestry is a social movement that has taken root across the United States. Local organizations and programs address equity and social justice as they establish trees and build community. The Alliance for Community Trees (ACT) was founded by a passionate group of local tree advocates, national program directors, and scientists united in their vision to champion urban and community forestry initiatives.

Their vision grew beyond expectations. Today ACT includes members from 59 states and provinces across the United States and Canada, as well as 16 other nations. ACT is also now a component of Arbor Day Foundation, where it is growing steadily and raising funds to support important local urban and community forestry projects.

In April 2024, early leaders and advocates reunited in Atlanta to chronicle the group's collective knowledge and wisdom, gained across decades of community-based activism.

“Being together once again was truly inspiring and I felt — as did everyone — that we recaptured the essence of the energy and enthusiasm that made the cause of urban forestry a reality. It was truly an honor to share our memories, our struggles and our accomplishments.”

Lynn Morris McManus
Baton Rouge Green



Remembering **Sue Probart, Founder of Tree New Mexico**

Sue founded Tree New Mexico in 1990, dedicating herself to enriching New Mexico's urban landscapes through tree planting and education. Under her leadership, TNM became a nationally recognized organization, aiding communities statewide in earning Tree City USA designations, establishing Navajo Nation Arbor Day, and even providing the National Christmas Tree for the White House in 2005.

It was her passing on January 9th, 2023, that inspired the 2024 ACT reunion, as her loss sparked realization for the need to bring early community forestry leaders together.

Attendees



1

Nancy Hughes
California Urban Forests Council

2

Annie Hermansen-Baez
USDA Forest Service

3

Edith Makra
Openlands Project

4

Andy Lipkis
TreePeople

5

Nancy Wolf
Environmental Action Coalition

6

Alice Ewen
Alliance for Community Trees

7

Lynn Morris McManus
Baton Rouge Green

8

Anna Dooley
Greenscape of Jacksonville

9

Shannon Ramsay
Trees Forever

10

Marcia Bansley
Trees Atlanta

11

Kathleen Wolf, Ph.D.
University of Washington

12

Matt Spitsen
Arbor Day Foundation

13

Phillip Rodbell
USDA Forest Service

14

Ed Macie
USDA Forest Service

15

Ray Tretheway
Sacramento Tree Foundation

16

Deborah Gangloff
American Forests

17

Donna Curtis
Shreveport Green

18

Don Willeke
Tree Trust

19

Jared Liu
Alliance for Community Trees

20

Greg McPherson, Ph.D.
USDA Forest Service

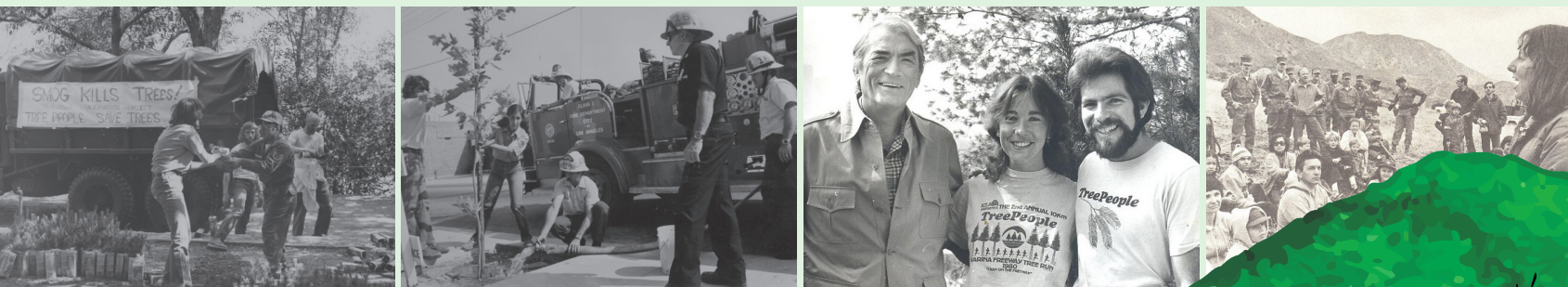
(Not Pictured) **Joan Lionetti**, Trees for Tucson



Recollections of a *green* revolution

The reunion agenda included recorded interview sessions with all who attended. The Alliance for Community Trees leaders each reflected on their organization's history, challenges and celebrations, in their own careers and within a community forestry movement. Here are some of the highlights. And though some of these experiences may have occurred years ago, they offer valuable insights for today's urban and community forestry leadership.





How things *started*

Decades ago urban and community forestry was viewed with curiosity and uncertainty. What was this? Can forestry really happen within communities?

Scattered about the country were small organizations working toward local environmental goals. They emerged, guided by deeply committed individuals who realized they had found their passion. Trees became symbol and expression of larger ideals. The pioneers didn't realize it, but they were part of the birth of a movement.



Nancy Wolf

*Environmental Action
Coalition*

New York City, New York



I was a staff member of a coalition born out of the Earth Day organizing group in New York City in 1970. They got a grant to do environmental education, so we did tree plantings with school kids. The energy and enthusiasm was fantastic. We knew that we had to get out there and start teaching kids and working with teachers about all these environmental issues.

It was magic from the beginning. We went back to the office, and I said, "We have tapped into something so profound that we don't even know what it is." And because we were into this tree thing, you know, I went down to the very first [urban forestry] conference in '78. We'd been busy doing this in New York, but guess what? It's happening in other cities. This was spontaneous. A friend of mine who's an archivist said this was truly, from the archival point of view, a revolution.

Donna Curtis

Shreveport Green

Shreveport, Louisiana



The movement starts as individuals, and it starts as an individual embracing the tree.

And that's exactly how it happened with us. I had worked as a speech pathologist for about seven years, and didn't enjoy it like I thought I would. But I was active in the community.

One thing I did was serve on the board of the Shreveport Beautification Foundation, which was a 50 or 60-year-old organization that had done tree plantings. They were some very old people; I was the youngest one there. And I got very active.

Within five years a group came together and formed Shreveport Green. I was hired as the new director. We were responding to the lack of recycling. But when they formed Shreveport Green and they got me, they got not only recycling projects, but they got tree projects, little projects. So really, with trees being my love, that's what we did.

Lynn Morris

Baton Rouge Green

Baton Rouge, LA



One day after church, my 12-year-old daughter was sitting in the back seat of the car. She looked out the window and said, "I can't wait to leave Baton Rouge." Her father looked at her and said, "Well, why is that?" She said, "Well, look, they're just cutting out all the trees. It's so ugly."

And that was the beginning.

He had started Baton Rouge Green, but he was a physician and had a big practice to run. So, I said, "Would you like some help with this?" So I went and I got a donated office. I had my card table, a typewriter, and a telephone. That was it. It grew and I served as the Executive Director from 1987 to 2000.

Shannon Ramsay

Trees Forever

Marion, IA



I grew up in Mississippi, so I especially appreciated live oaks. And of course, the Midwest lacks live oaks, but it does have a lot of wonderful trees. But there was a sense that we weren't doing enough to replant. Communities were losing trees to development.

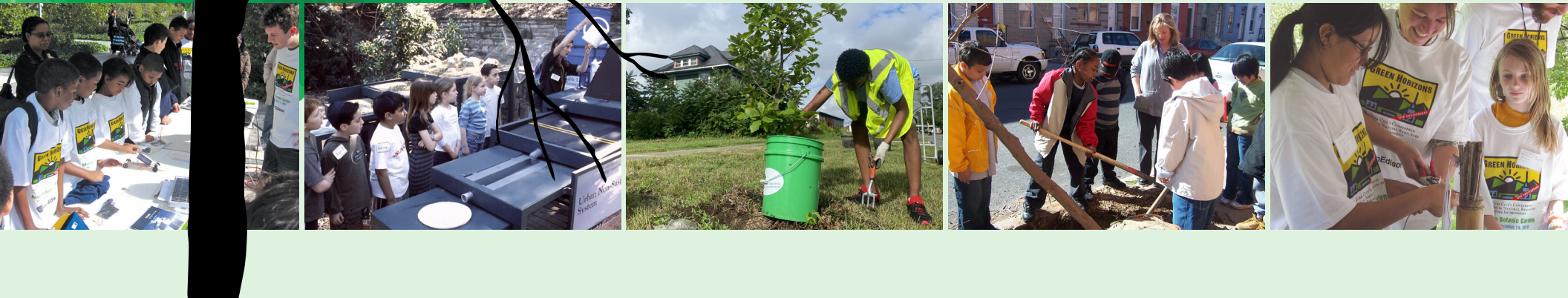
I felt like we needed an organization to build more awareness around trees, speak for the trees, and help with replanting. We did a lot of writing and press releases, and all sorts of shenanigans to get attention, keep attention and change things.

People sent us money, and they were very encouraging. I got great encouragement from the State Foresters Office, from the Governor, from nurseries, and just people who loved trees.

Connections, growth and *stability*

Early startups, locally and at the national level, began slowly and with little resources, then expanded due to a combination of pluck and luck.

The Alliance for Community Trees began as a coalition of local organizations that sought to create something bigger. They soon recognized that strength and value was centered in local relationships. Lessons learned and program successes were shared across the network. This helped to strengthen local organizations and build more momentum for both national initiatives and local resources.



Deborah Gangloff

American Forests
Washington, D.C.



I started with American Forests in Washington, D.C. in 1982 with the launch of their Urban Forestry Program. We immediately had calls from several people wanting to get involved in a coalition of tree groups.

We'd already known about TreePeople in L.A., and a few others that had started. They already had connections. We held a conference in Cincinnati and launched a series of Urban Forestry Conferences, starting in '82. So, we knew we couldn't plant with as much authority and responsibility and ownership in local areas— in the urban areas, at least—as local groups could. We needed the groups to do the community involvement, the empowerment of the citizens, to find out what communities wanted to do.

We decided on a loose coalition. They signed kind of a nice agreement saying that they will play well together. They decided to all pursue their own 501(c)(3) tax status. And all the independent local groups came together for the national group that they called the Alliance for Community Trees.

Alice Ewen

*Alliance for
Community Trees*
Washington, D.C.



I started with American Forests from '97 to 2000. And then Marcia [Bansley of Trees Atlanta] called me and said, "We need an executive director for the Alliance for Community Trees, and you should do this." And I embarked on this whole new life as the Executive Director for the Alliance for Community Trees from 2000 to 2011.

We had this incredible set of leaders. But how do you build a national organization when all of your national leaders have fish to fry at home? And I thought, because I'd worked both at the national level and locally, I had an idea that with two together, you can do a lot.

The big campaign that was really successful was when we secured funding from The Home Depot Foundation. ACT went from just me, with a very small amount of money, to having support for a four-year campaign. That really built out all of our stuff. The more that we worked with these other players, the more successful we were.

Ray Tretheway

*Sacramento Tree
Foundation*
Sacramento, CA



The Tree Foundation is very, very unique. We didn't start because we were fighting for a tree, or to preserve a tree, or some land with trees. The mayor of Sacramento called the community together and said, "We need you to consider starting the Sacramento Tree Foundation, a nonprofit."

This was the great wisdom. The Foundation had a five-year plan, and it was only two months in and we figured out we were doing everything wrong. Trees need stewardship—a minimum of three years—and for volunteers we needed recruitment, training.

The second bold move of the Tree Foundation was, "We're going to plant a million trees for the coming decade." This, when we had one full-time person, two part-time people, and a board of 40. We had a press conference to announce it. Then our local utility came along, "You cut it in half. 15,000 trees in 18 months. We'll give you \$2 million." So, we went from stair step zero to stair step ten overnight.

Marcia Bansley

Trees Atlanta

Atlanta, GA



I was in the Junior League of Atlanta and they had started a group called Friends of the River. We went to lobby in Washington, D.C. with Andrew Young to help us create this park on the Chattahoochee River. So, I had all that experience and all those connections with all those environmental people for years, for ten years.

The Junior League had advertised a job at Trees Atlanta in their newsletter, and I was hired. I wasn't really the founder, but for eight years, I was the only employee. I knew how to hustle. And so we hustled to get everybody I knew to help. In the beginning I cried, and then I started gathering people around and doing things.

It was a lot of fun, because we were inventing it as we went. Of course, there were giant problems all the time, but you get so used to solving the giant problems, and you just keep on moving.

Andy Lipkis

TreePeople

Los Angeles, California



I founded the organization that is known as TreePeople. I was afraid it might succeed, that I might get stuck for life—which turned out to be true. But I said, "Look, I've got to do it. It's calling me, and I'm going to respond, and I am going to do it without the fear of it succeeding."

My first big challenge was when I identified trees that we needed. They were available in a state plant nursery - 20,000 of them, and there was a price tag on them. I ordered the trees - a crisis arose. The manager said, "If we don't sell these by April 15th, we're going to plow them under."

I flew to L.A. to find donors, and then called the nursery, "I'll get the money today." And they said, "Well, the guy's on the tractor. It's too late." But I called the L.A. Times. A reporter called back, "I called the governor's office to ask them how they felt about the trees being plowed under." That immediately triggered a call from the governor's office to the Department of Forestry.

The Times did a story on it; they quoted me saying, "I think I need \$0.50 per tree." Thousands of people sent 50¢ or a dollar. And there were other larger contributions. But within three weeks, we had \$10,000 and the trees.

Edith Makra

Openlands

Chicago, IL



I was with the Openlands Project [in the Chicago area], and I ran a program called Neighborwoods. I got called into a neighborhood, the sort of place that we now know as "tree equity." There was [an elementary school] principal who said, "We really need you out here. We really need the trees."

I went to go visit the school, and the schoolyard was an entire city block with a building on one end and desolate pavement with a little patch of dirt. And he said, "Please." And I said, "OK, I'll make it work."

I got written up for the Chicago Tribune. The article, 'She Cries for the Trees,' was published on the obituary page. The new mayor used to read the obituaries ... I got recruited and was invited to join his staff. So, I was able to advance a lot of the policies that I wanted to, and the program.

I think the city put up \$10,000 to do some of the early planning. Then Mayor Daley worked some powerful connections, and we got a [federal] earmark of \$900,000 to do the Chicago Urban Forest Climate Project. It became UFORE*, which then became i-Tree**. And that's the global impact.

*Urban Forest Effects – urban environmental benefits modeling **i-Tree – USDA Forest Service urban tree and ecosystems benefits modeling

Greg McPherson, Ph.D.
USDA Forest Service Research
Davis, California



My challenges really occurred primarily when I joined the U.S. Forest Service [after leaving academia], because the agency's research really is about serving the National Forests. Part of the challenge was convincing the Forest Service that there is an urban population out there that can be reached through urban forestry.

We did come to the point of being on the [budget] chopping block. They were looking at our units as being not essential. We had developed such good relationships with the electric utilities, with the nonprofits, and with the universities that were cooperating with. We reached out and were able to get what became infamously known as the 'Book of Letters.' It was a compilation of 55 letters to various senators, congresspeople, and the heads of Forest Service research.

That book of letters took on a real life of its own and did actually convince the power brokers to keep us alive. We did have our budgets reduced, but we weren't totally terminated.

Kathleen Wolf, Ph.D.
University of Washington
Seattle, Washington



I was a freshly minted Ph.D. in 1995, and survival in academia means getting grants. The US Forest Service had a brand new grant program for urban forestry. The funding required partnership and collaboration - not just with other scientists, but with communities. That started what became a decades long research program about trees and nature in cities and human benefits.

It just continued to grow. Nonprofits and local organizations, local government agencies - they were all willing to help out. The accounting and reporting of the partners' match - that was no fun. But it meant I was connected with grassroots communities. I didn't even know it was ACT then; I just knew it was a group of people who wanted to do good by their communities by planting and nurturing trees. And I got more grants because local partners helped develop the research. I was committed to public outreach about findings. Partners put out results within their communities and frankly, all across the nation. All in all, it was unexpected, but I landed in a bunch of great, productive and lasting relationships.

Donald C Willeke
Tree Trust
Saint Paul, Minnesota



I'm affiliated with the Tree Trust of the Twin Cities, but I've also offered advice at the national level. Early on we started with communities; we also worked with existing nonprofits and formed some nonprofits. Every major city [in the U.S.] now has a tree organization, and most states have urban forest councils. When the early [federal] money was available, back in about 1990 and '91 and '92, I argued to form urban forest councils in every state. When you assemble an organization like a state shade tree advisory committee or a state urban forest council, you get people [across cities] talking to each other.

When you get people together, they naturally say, "Well, we've got to influence those people," or "We've got to talk to those folks." That's a natural outgrowth of pulling people together and saying, "Look, we've got this problem. What are we going to do about it?"



Thoughts for new generations of *local leaders*

The urban and community forestry leaders that came together in Atlanta in April 2024 looked back over decades of experiences and organization development work.

Many are retired from their leadership positions but continue to serve as board members or volunteers. They are proud of their achievements, but hope the lessons learned can be the launch for ever-more expanded and successful urban and community forestry programs. During the interviews they offered reflections on what works – back then and into the future.

“How do you build the best urban forest? I have never heard anybody ask that question ever. Of course, you have to answer the question of, ‘What is the best urban forest?’ **It’s not about how trees are staked or how many trees are planted. It’s about the people—their policies, their investments, their interests, their activity, and their belief that they need to have a complete urban forest.** You can’t be partial. It has to be understood by everybody. Everybody has to have a personal responsibility, an environmental ethic, which then translates to air quality and water quality. There’s nothing simple about the answer. It’s very complex, very comprehensive. It’s at a scale beyond all scales. It’s everybody. 90% of the urban forest is controlled by you and me.”

“It’s really important to be out there among peer users, the people that your science is directed to—not only to share your science, but to learn what their needs are. If you make your research relevant, then what good is it if people aren’t going to use it? If they aren’t going to hear about it they aren’t going to find that it adds value to their work, then it’s not going to be important to them.”

“Government—which includes researchers and academe funded by government—and corporations and nonprofit. **You need all three of those parts of society to make it, whether it’s at the local level or the national or international level.** You have to have all three. That way, everybody gets to be a part of it, and everybody’s responsible for their part of it.”

“At different levels of government, inputs impact your decision making. Activists sometimes oversimplify that. Out of context, **it’s harder for that decision maker to respond favorably if that advocacy group, in the case of tree groups, are not sensitive to the universe of constraints and decisions and priorities that local government has—or state government or federal government.** The antidote to that is to do more listening as an advocate and to be patient.”

“We’re going to see leaders and talent emerge out of all of this investment. And they may not stay in the place that they are. **Just because an organization receives funds and then at the end of the day, they don’t become a 100-year-old**

organization that stays forever, follow the people. The talent is actually what matters in nonprofits, not the institution.

You’re going to see people come through that experience who go on and do great things, either in place or at some other organization. It’ll be really interesting to follow them and see what the ripple effect is.”

“Being the executive director of a small nonprofit is the hardest job in the entire world. They have to either do it, or somebody has to do it. And often, they don’t have a large enough staff to do everything the way they should. **Every day you have to think about fundraising. If you don’t, then you’re not going to be a successful executive director.**

So the best advice to any group that’s trying to be there for quite a while and stay afloat is that they need a reserve fund more than anything else. They need to have one month’s expenses available, at least. When we finally established that, I stopped being scared to death about paying the staff all the time. I recycled that money over and over and over because the grant money came in bits and pieces, but your bills are constant.”

“This is a lifelong pursuit. It isn't something that is done, and then you can go home and say it's taken care of.” Just like the forest itself, when we started losing big trees in Minneapolis, people said, ‘This is terrible.’ And I said, ‘Well, it is, but you've got to understand that a true forest, whether urban or rural, is constantly changing.’

It's maturing. It's suffering losses. It's suffering gains. **All of these things, like life itself—like your life and mine—require constant attention, forward pressure, and effort.”**

“In the beginning, you're at that stage where you just have one desk and your computer, or whatever. You are wearing all the hats. Often, what happens is you raise money, and then you've got to report on all your projects. You've got to bring in new funds. You've got to get your projects done. It is a huge amount of work to keep all that going.

I often coach other nonprofits, and say, ‘What do you not enjoy doing?’ Of course bookkeeping— accounting—is one that just drives people nuts. So hire a good accountant, even if they're part time. Talk a volunteer into helping.”

“Always be dressed up so you can deal with the business community. I was always dressed up. **Connect with the business community and sell the trees as good for the image of the city—not just beauty, but the image of the city. They are concerned about what the city looks like to everybody.**

Get yourself connected with the business community as much as you can. When corporations have to fill tables at balls and events, volunteer to do that. They'll love you because you can fill in those tables.”

“What is the meaning of this tree planting? It is about saving lives. It is about cooling communities and achieving canopy or food or a combination. Although our mindset is to show your power, to show your competence, and do it for people, that's the best way to ensure that trees don't get cared for. When we look at the urgency of climate, we have it in our DNA. **We have it in our power to hold hands and cooperate and move beyond our separateness to help each other. This is an opportunity to actually activate that and build that capacity in communities.**

Even if it's young people, they can be trained and supported in becoming leaders that pull out the participation and exercise the dormant muscles we've been given for our community. **We are divided. We can't be. The people who are going to save each other in these major climate events are your neighbors.”**

From Legacy to *inspiration*

Over recent decades urban and community forestry has expanded into many communities. New generations are providing leadership. Yet there are timeless truths and best practices for successful tree programs. First planned as a memorial, the reunion purpose soon shifted to planning a unique opportunity to collect and share place-based deep learning.

All who attended had been active in the earliest days of urban and community forestry. Each was part of an organization that inspired new visions of the importance of trees in communities and the importance of work at the local level — a true “bottom up” force that could not be denied. These ambitions and passions still resonate in the social movement that is urban and community forestry today.



**The Alliance for Community Trees is a network
of bold doers – inventive local organizations,
nonprofits, and individuals making their corners
of the world better through trees.**

Alliance members plug into a web of support with
knowledge-sharing, mentorship, resources, and
funding opportunities to make their work come alive.

Learn about our work, meet today's members,
and discover how to get involved by visiting
[www.arborday.org/our-work/
alliance-community-trees](http://www.arborday.org/our-work/alliance-community-trees).

