

Tree Love

A South Bay organization sets out on a mission to grow a greener city—one tree at a time. Allison Johnston reports.

Born out of a desire to beautify and maintain the health of a city and educate its inhabitants all at once, San Jose-based tree-planting program Our City Forest (OCF) has been cultivating a healthier urban environment for the past 15 years.

Rhonda Berry, founder and president of OCF, understood at an early age that a city's most valuable natural resource is its urban forest. After her graduation from UC Berkeley, a short stint as a Vista Volunteer, and a decade-long career in public administration, Berry was invited to San Jose to head the city's first urban forestry program in 1994.

"Tree-planting nonprofits are not a new idea," says Berry. "Many cities around the country have such groups, but San Jose didn't have one, and we saw a real need." Though environmental awareness is at its height now, this was not always the case. Berry and her team encountered significant challenges, most notably financial, as the public did not see an urban forestry program as a vital use of city resources. After finally proving that a nonprofit and a city can work together to accomplish great things, OCF was not only accepted, but embraced by city officials and citizens alike as an expert in tree stewardship and as a true partner in the fight for environmental conservation.

Planting services are far reaching and specialized, allowing for tree requests by individual residents, neighborhoods, and parks, as well as school plantings accompanied by in-class presentations about the benefits of tree planting and preservation. The organization has successfully planted 45,000 15-gallon shade trees, maintained a 90 percent tree survival rate, and leveraged over five million dollars in tree grants for San Jose neighborhoods.

But for Berry, this is not enough. Hoping to expand OCF's presence within the community, Berry and her team at OCF have plans to launch a "Treemobile" as part of their environmental education program, complete the building of a native tree nursery, and host OCF's first-ever Earth Day event, "A Benefit for Trees," which will include an auction featuring original tree art and community awards for urban forestry.

After hearing about Berry's work, one can't help but be reminded of another historical icon known for his indefatigability and unbridled passion for the environment—Johnny Appleseed. Though he is no longer around to witness the renewed sense of environmental awareness that has swept the world in recent years, he can rest easy knowing his mission has been continued by those such as Berry—a benevolent and compassionate tree-planting activist who, with the help of her committed team, spreads seeds (both literally and figuratively) of life and learning. "It's a beautiful thing," says Berry of OCF's work. We couldn't agree more. www.ourcityforest.org ■



Ways You Can Help:

- Give 10 months of full-time service to OCF in exchange for "green" job training, a living stipend, and an educational grant. E-mail resumé with cover letter to Monica at mneanez@ourcityforest.org.
- Be a corporate sponsor for OCF's "A Benefit for Trees" Earth Day celebration on April 18. Contact Rhonda Berry directly at 408.998.7337 x106.
- Donate office equipment or planting tools and materials, such as shovels, gloves, computer paper, digital cameras, and more. Check out website for a list of in-kind donations needed.
- Shop at Amazon.com and 4% of your purchase price will be donated to Our City Forest. www.ourcityforest.org/amazoninfo.html