

It's Never Just About the Trees!

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Photos by Jeremiah Juncal

On October 23, 2010 the California nonprofit United Voices for Healthier Communities 2 (UVHC2) celebrated "Make a Difference Day" in San Diego County. I participated by organizing a tree planting event in Oceanside's MarLado Highlands Park. As the event coordinator, I realized that receiving and planting the trees was only a part of the overall experience.

MarLado Highlands Park is a 13.84-acre (5.6 ha) neighborhood park initially beautified with California sycamore (*Platanus racemosa*) and white alder (*Alnus rhombifolia*) trees. The alder trees have been dying off over the past five years. After several attempts by arboricultural specialists and pathologists to diagnose the cause of their mortality as well as that of hundreds of other alders in San Diego County, there has been no final determination. However, we've speculated that the trees may have contracted a disease as seedlings in the nursery that only manifested twenty years later.

Years of soil compaction, continual irrigation to keep the turf below the trees green, mechanical damage at the base of the trees, and vandalism have also contributed to the mortality spiral decline. In analyzing

the problem and anticipating replacement of the trees, we considered soil type, microclimate, the greater surrounding environment, water usage, and intended function. This eventually led us to replace the trees with Western redbuds (*Cercis occidentalis*) and Mexican sycamores (*Platanus mexicana* 'Alamo'). They are more suitable for the site, will require less irrigation, and the Mexican sycamores are more resistant to anthracnose and powdery mildew than the native sycamore trees in Southern California.

Due to a large budget reduction in operations and maintenance of our parks, the City of Oceanside did not have tree replacement funds. To make matters worse, there was a lingering adversarial relationship between the neighborhood homeowners association and the City. Having affiliation with the San Diego Regional Urban Forests Council (SDRUFC) and knowing that the UVHC2 grant would be available, I was able to explain to upper management that the City could benefit from partnering with the association in applying for the grant. If the park was going to be returned to its former glory, it would have to be a community effort.



Above: A local yoga group leads workers and volunteers in pre-planting yoga poses in Oceanside, California.
Left: Team leader Aaron Sehauer gives planting instruction in Oceanside's MarLado Highlands Park.

Our park superintendent approached one of the community leaders to see if the association was interested in applying for the grant on behalf of the City. This seemed to be a simple request with a win-win resolution; however, given past tensions, the challenge was to evenly divide the tasks so that each party was satisfied with their contribution towards preparing for the event. There was so much to do with so little time.

I enlisted the help of three local nonprofit organizations. The first was the Urban Corps of San Diego County, with an extremely well trained and knowledgeable group of strong youthful workers. Second was the San Diego Regional Urban Forests Council, an organization made up of certified arborists, consulting arborists, urban foresters, landscape architects and designers, educators, and government and private foresters. The third organization I approached was the California Urban Forests Council, which advocates for California's urban forests, creates educational materials, empowers residents to participate in urban forestation projects, develops and supports local, regional and statewide urban forestry programs, and manages the UVHC grants program.

I also established a group of five extremely talented professional colleagues as team leaders who had strength and expertise in the various areas of arboriculture.

We could now address the specifics of distributing flyers, soliciting volunteers, contacting possible sponsors and donors, and recruiting students at a local community college. Understanding the importance of involving local organizations and businesses, we began contacting them to help with donations of supplies and food needed to feed the volunteers during the event. I found that most of them were not even familiar with the term "urban forest" or even knew where MarLado Highlands Park was located.

Every task required engaging someone or some group. The training I received from the Municipal Forestry Institute on volunteerism, nonprofit organizations, and gaining community support, as well as research on community involvement in preparation for taking the California Urban Forests Council Certified Urban Forester examination, all proved to be invaluable.

Initially, coaching the organizing team was the most challenging task. The team understood the necessity to organize the various tasks; however, they questioned why the City would invest such effort to plant just a few more trees. They asked, "Why can't the City just buy the trees and have our public works crew plant them? Wouldn't that be less troublesome? Surely the City could somehow find money to fund the tree planting."

I explained that due to budget restraints the City really did not have the funds for replacing the trees. It would be up to our team to help meet the challenge and



Student volunteers watch a slope tree planting demo in MarLado Highlands Park.



Urban Corps of San Diego volunteers help out with "Make a Difference Day."

organize the tree planting event. Besides, this wasn't just about planting trees. As the Arbor Day Foundation's 2010 *Friends of Tree City USA Annual Report* says, "Today, cooperation and partnerships are essential for success."

The integration of seventy-six (!) people volunteering their talent, time, and efforts made the planting event possible. During the event there were plenty of volunteers to keep the various elements of the day running smoothly and on time. There was perhaps less participation from the homeowner association members than I would have hoped, but the ones that did participate were very enthusiastic. We even had a yoga club participate by showing us how to properly stretch our muscles before planting the trees!

The park superintendent had concerns that there wouldn't be enough City labor available to water the newly planted trees for the first three months. This was easily remedied by creating a signed watering agreement contract with the participating association members. The volunteers were even more motivated after the five professional team leaders taught them about proper planting depth, root formation, and soil nutrition. The tree planting volunteers were able to ask questions about the process and learned how to use the proper tools. Everyone came away with greater knowledge and appreciation for trees, me included!

The tree replacements at MarLado Highlands Park are an asset to the community and will provide future generations the many benefits trees have to offer. Furthermore, by engaging in multi-entity partnerships, we accomplished a valuable service *and* developed a synergistic network of quality people dedicated to enhancing their community. I have come to understand, it's never just about the trees! 🌿