

# Johnny Appleseed: City Slicker

Friends of the Urban Forest is  
Growing a Greener San Francisco

By Lord Martine & Kara Emry • Photos: Mike Sugrue

More than simply an aesthetic presence in our lives, trees possess and offer a wealth of possibilities. Beauty. Elegance. Oxygen. An abundance of environmental, economic, and social benefits. Trees are more than just a luxury, they're an imperative for even the most urban facets of our society.

As green as San Francisco may seem, we're actually behind most American cities in "tree coverage." In fact, a recent UC Davis study shows that there are still 127,000 empty sidewalk basins waiting to welcome trees.

But those basins won't stay empty for very long, as Friends of the Urban Forest, or FUF, is working vigorously to make San Francisco greener. A nonprofit, volunteer-based community tree-planting organization, FUF was founded in San Francisco 25 years ago. The group has planted thousands of trees throughout the city. How many? More than all of the trees that grace Golden Gate Park.

**NAME:**

Tom H. Ramirez

**DISTRICT:**

Glen Park

**FUF VOLUNTEER:**

26 trees in 2006

**TREE:**

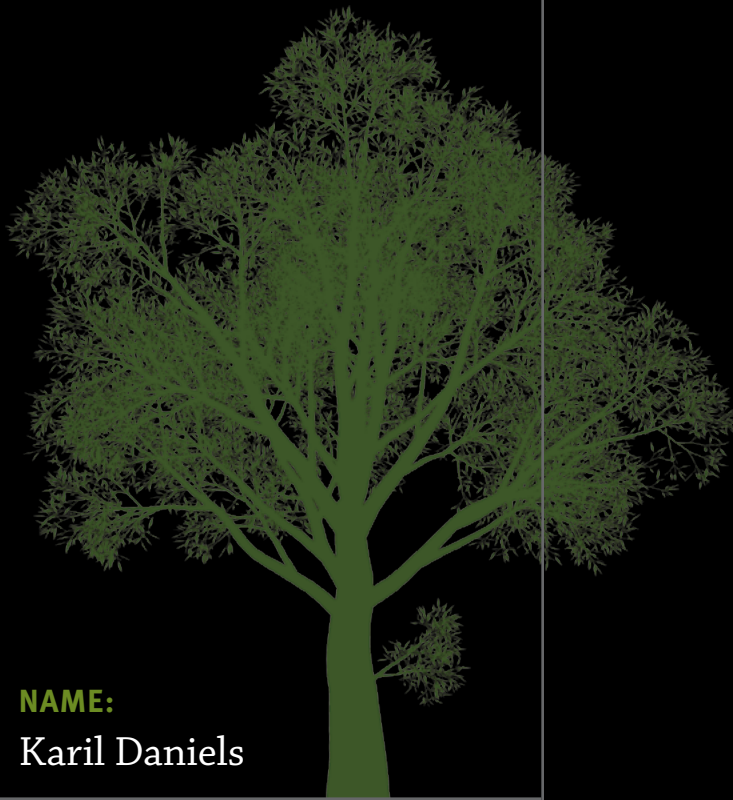
Chinese Box Elder

**GREEN THOUGHTS:**

"I've always believed in volunteerism and philanthropy," says Tom. "But this has brought a tremendous amount of satisfaction. And it's a great way to get to know your neighbors."







**NAME:**

Karil Daniels

**DISTRICT:**

Mission

**FUF VOLUNTEER:**

Since 1991, chronicling the growth of trees in San Francisco through film

**TREE:**

Jacaranda

**GREEN THOUGHTS:**

“Not only do trees enhance the beauty of where we live, but they also get people involved in a natural kind of way. Trees enhance everyday life and spirit. We need to be growing green energy.”

It's true green (regrets to blue), FUF has transformed San Francisco's cityscape.

Since its inception on Arbor Day, 1981, FUF's volunteers have planted more than 40,000 trees along the streets of San Francisco, accounting for more than 40 percent of all the city's current street trees. Neighbors organize the plantings, FUF obtains permits, removes sidewalk concrete, supplies tools and materials, and selects, purchases, and delivers the trees. On planting day, FUF volunteers and arborists work together with residents. When the work is done, everyone's invited to take part in a well-earned community banquet.

FUF offers neighborhoods the power to take responsibility for their environment through community beautification. But the commonweal focus of this green-centric nonprofit is to do much more than just stick trees into the ground. Its purpose is to provide San Franciscans with financial, technical, and practical assistance, not just for tree planting and tree care but for community involvement and youth education. FUF's Youth Tree Care Program is one of the most notable and noble aspects of the organization. The program trains and employs economically disadvantaged urban youth through an innovative jobs program.

Coming from all over the city, with diverse backgrounds, and all with their own reasons for wanting to work, disadvantaged kids are stepping up

and literally getting their hands dirty while working side-by-side with their neighbors. Without the youth crew, FUF wouldn't be nearly as successful in fulfilling its twin goals of community building and urban greening. Indeed, the youth program is so outstanding and so well received, FUF is committed to expanding it. The boys and girls employed by the FUF program learn fundamentals of urban forestry by becoming fully trained in tree planting and tree care. They also benefit from exploration field trips, hikes, and camping excursions, and from attending special events like the Green Festival, the Brower Youth Awards, the Goldman Environmental Awards, and other FUF events. Many young employees will work at local community farms and gardens, such as the Double Rock Farm in the Bayview district. For others, it will be their first opportunity for exploration outside the city. Some have never had a boss or a set schedule, much less a paycheck or an opportunity to gain critical employment skills.

Through all of its programs, FUF seeks to improve our city's environment, build community, and connect San Franciscans with the natural world and with each other. Trees bring immeasurable and diversified environmental, economic, and social benefits to the city. Increasing public awareness and appreciation of the importance of trees to San Francisco makes a greener, healthier, and more beautiful city while helping to create a vibrant future.



**NAME:**

Mike Sullivan and Paul Loeffler

**DISTRICT:**

Cole Valley

**FUF VOLUNTEER:**

Since 1991

**TREE:**

Soapbark

**GREEN THOUGHTS:**

“We planted this tree in January 2004, the same week our son Jason was born,” says Mike. “The perks of sprout are many. The environmental benefits of creating oxygen are clear, but the real reason urban trees are important is that they soften the hard edge of the concrete city. Furthermore, they create community and something of beauty.”







**NAME:**

Donna Sharee

**DISTRICT:**

Excelsior

**FUF VOLUNTEER:**

Since 1999. Planted about 150 saplings

**TREE:**

Melaleuca linariifolia

**GREEN THOUGHTS:**

“I love walking through the neighborhood and seeing the trees I helped plant. More trees definitely make the neighborhood a nicer place to live ... and they will outlive me. As wonderful as it is to bring new trees into the world, I think it’s just as important to initiate new relationships between neighbors. I have made some lasting friendships through working with FUF.”

## The Youth behind Friends of the Urban Forest

For more than a decade, Friends of the Urban Forest has provided a remarkable jobs program for underserved youth in San Francisco. The FUF Youth Tree Care Program offers teens employment skills, respect for nature, and a more positive future. This highly-successful program helps FUF meet its twin goals of community building and urban greening.

There are few paying jobs for youth looking to work; there are even fewer paying positions in the environmental field. FUF provides jobs for youth, aged 14 to 18, who are looking for their first real job. The participants come from all over the city and are of different backgrounds, but the major thing they have in common is a determination to work, to earn a fair paycheck. Many have never had a boss, a set schedule, or work that depended solely on them. The youth program is their opportunity to make a living wage (\$9.10 is the starting salary) but also to gain essential employability skills. Before joining FUF most of the teens do not know anything about trees or even care about them. Through the course of the program they become fully trained in tree planting and tree care, including how to prune a tree’s canopy and roots properly, species identification, basic disease diagnosis, use of arborist tools, and safety. They learn the fundamentals of urban forestry as well as the protocols and responsibilities of earning a paycheck.

Research shows that paid work experience helps low-income youth stay in school longer. FUF’s program emphasizes skills-oriented activities and promotes cooperative learning, where students learn from each other. The experience of speaking with homeowners about their trees builds confidence and leadership skills. A successful program provides tasks with dignity, not “busy work.” In fact, without the youth crew, FUF would not be able to fulfill its obligation in providing three tree care visits in the first three years of a FUF tree’s life. More than 6,075 trees have been cared for by the youth crew. They also participate in plantings, and have planted some 1,480 trees. While the bulk of the youth crew’s job is tree care and tree plantings, it’s not the only work the crew does: They also assist at local community farms and gardens such as Double Rock Farm in the Bayview.

The Youth Tree Care Program is not all work and no play. The participants also explore and experience San Francisco and the greater Bay Area through field trips. These have included visits to several of San Francisco’s parks, the San Francisco Zoo, and the Exploratorium. The youth have gone on tree tours where instead of working on trees, they get to enjoy them. They also learn the names of trees and can see older trees that have benefited from the pruning jobs of previous youth participants. By the end of the program, every youth has a favorite tree. The crew attends special events like the Green Festival, the Brower Youth Awards, the Goldman Environmental Awards, and FUF events. They go on hikes and go camping in the summer; for many, these outings are their first opportunities for exploration outside an urban area.

In 24 sessions, 247 youth have completed FUF’s Youth Tree Care Program. As diverse as their backgrounds were, they all finished the program with employability skills, a fuller wallet, and a newfound respect for trees.

—Nancy Strahan