

# Neighborhood groups see trees as vital landmarks that deserve extra protection

By Lexie Heinle / World-Herald staff writer | Posted: Thursday, April 23, 2015 1:00 am

The old Kentucky coffeetree in Elmwood Park was a constant presence in Diana Failla's childhood, the scene of family picnics and afternoons spent reading.

"We grew up under the tree," said the president of the Midtown Neighborhood Alliance. It was "shelter, refuge and a place for calm."

That tree came down last year, but it's at the top of her list to replace.

As a soon-to-be certified arborist, Failla pays close attention to her neighborhood's trees.

"I see trees as landmarks," she said. "The trees mark generations of people who move around them." She points to Bemis Park's druid oak, which was planted in 1787, and Elmwood Park's white oak, a champion tree planted 150 years ago.

Those trees have stood the test of time, but many others in Nebraska are in jeopardy.

Approximately 50 percent of the state's public trees have been lost since the late 1970s, according to Nebraska Forest Service's community tree inventories. Diseases like Dutch Elm, extreme weather like tornadoes and simply old age have devastated community forests, which include trees along the streets or in public areas like schools and parks. The June 2014 flooding alone cost the Omaha metro area 6,250 trees from its estimated 3.9 million total.

To maintain Nebraska's tree canopy, local groups sprang into action — not just on Earth Day or Arbor Day, both this week, but year round.

When Failla took the helm of Midtown Neighborhood Alliance in March 2013, one of her goals was growing the alliance's ReTree Midtown program with the help of its chairman, John Ransom. The entirely grant-funded program plants trees in public areas and along the streets of central Omaha.

From its beginning in 2009 to 2013, ReTree Midtown has planted 428 trees. Its goal is 1,000 trees, complementing the ReTree Nebraska goal of 1 million trees planted across the state by 2017.

ReTree Nebraska is the forest service's statewide initiative that distributes mini-grants, records tree plantings and recruits ambassadors in communities. Those local ambassadors know the needs of the town, while ReTree Nebraska suggests experts to consult.

Jessica Kelling, ReTree Nebraska coordinator, said the similarly titled Omaha group answered her program's



## Trees

A tree is planted and watered in the Vintage Heights neighborhood in Lincoln.

call to action and ran with it.

Since its beginning in 2007, ReTree Nebraska has distributed tree-planting grants in more than 92 communities.

The Vintage Heights neighborhood in Lincoln is one of those communities. From 2012 to 2014, the Vintage Heights Homeowners Association has added 57 trees to its commons area. The charge started 2½ years ago when an old cottonwood tree crashed in Dan and Diana Wheeler’s backyard, which sits next to the association’s commons area.

The loss of the old tree led the Wheelers to consider a more sustainable landscape. They contacted Justin Evertson, interim director of the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum, who developed a plan for the neighborhood. That plan formed Dan Wheeler’s campaign for vice president of the neighborhood association’s board.

As vice president, Wheeler applies for the ReTree Nebraska grants and meets with groups like the Lower Platte South Natural Resources District and city officials.

“We want people to feel that sense of ownership that extends past their own backyards,” Diana Wheeler said.

ReTree Midtown and Vintage Heights rely on various groups and programs outside of their neighborhoods to make their tree plantings successful. ReTree Midtown gets funding from the Peter Kiewit Foundation and the Mayor’s Neighborhood Grant, while ReTree Nebraska and the association pay for Vintage Height’s trees. United Way’s Day of Caring, local businesses and Lincoln Parks and Recreation have helped with the planting.

“Trees are symbolic of neighborhoods pulling together and planting together,” said Ransom of ReTree Midtown.

Engaging the community is also one of Failla’s goals with ReTree Midtown. After the initial tree planting, neighbors’ involvement can decrease. In her own neighborhood, Elmwood Park, Failla has created an Adopt a Tree program. After a brief education on tree care, the participants help to water, mulch and otherwise nurture the public trees. Failla said the association hopes to expand the program to all midtown neighborhoods.

For both groups, having a mix of trees is important.

“Tree diversity is key,” Kelling said. A general target is no more than 10 percent of any one species, which helps the community forest survive when storms, drought or disease hit. Vintage Heights has planted 24 tree species, and ReTree Midtown has 49.

Failla said a priority for the program is “making sure those trees are in the right place so they stay there for generations.” On April 1, the group’s commitment to future generations earned them an award from the forest service.

“We are continuing to grow, learn, educate and branch into areas other than planting trees,” Failla said.

Vintage Heights has plans for a landscape designed for storm-water runoff, a rain garden and conservation of the Bird Sanctuary wetlands.

The groups' efforts, like the trees, have a long life.

Future generations will be able to gather under the Kentucky coffeetree like Failla and her family did.

"I'm sure the other children will enjoy it just as much," she said.

**Contact the writer:**

402-444-1304, [news@owh.com](mailto:news@owh.com)