

# Penn Hills Shade Tree Commission Takes Root

Newly formed Penn Hills Shade Tree Commission hopes its efforts grow for years to come.



BY W.B. FRESA

For Kathy Raborn, it's pretty simple—she loves the environment and she loves trees. A landscape designer by trade, she's spent the last 20 years not only growing her business, but also cultivating connections in her Penn Hills community in hopes of someday giving back.

That time has finally come. "I'm so thrilled the Penn Hills Shade Tree Commission (PHSTC) is finally up and running," says Raborn. "It's taken quite a while to pull everything together, but we've already had a huge outpouring of support from our mayor and council, as well as the Penn Hills community. We're looking to do great things here."

Raborn, President of the PHSTC, explains that her idea of a formal commission began when she started her business more than 20 years ago. After taking a class in late 2016 about shade tree commissions, she wrote a letter to Penn Hills Mayor Sara Kuhn, asking her to consider a request to establish the PHSTC. A friend then suggested she speak at the next council meeting in order to get the ball rolling.

"Anyone who knows me knows I don't like public speaking," she notes. "But in March 2017, I gave a presentation to city council about the benefits of a shade tree commission. It was well-received and we finally got the ordinance passed and full approval in June 2017."

During the second half of last year, Raborn developed a plan and enlisted PHSTC members, whom she had worked with at times over the years. They came with many years of expertise and shared the same vision of a better environment for their beloved Penn Hills.

The PHSTC members include Sandy Feather, a certified arborist and former writer for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette gardening column; Bryan Dolney, an ecologist with the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy; Katie Schuller, a horticulturalist at Phipps Conservatory and lead orchid grower; and Tori DeJohn, a mechanical engineer and community activist.

Once the commission was in place, the first act of business was to have a fundraiser, and the members began calling on different businesses to help. Autograph Signs donated a six-foot banner, Penn Hills Lawn and Garden Center donated a tree, and the commission set up a booth at the 2017 Penn Hills Summerfest and raffled off the tree. By October, PHSTC held its first community tree planting at Penn Hills Elementary School.

"We planted 15 trees of two different species. Lowe's donated five crabapple trees and we salvaged 10 tulip tree seedlings from a Penn Hills resident's yard. We used our first \$100 to buy fencing, posts and mulch to protect the trees from our very prosperous deer population and were lucky enough to have the Boy Scouts

help dig the holes we needed. It was a true community event," Raborn says.

It was also the momentum needed to use the winter months to do more planning and hold a workshop on how to prune trees. Fifteen Penn Hills residents attended and they pruned 50 trees at Penn Hills Elementary School.

"The school is only 5 years old but the trees definitely needed some attention and our workshop did the trick," explains Raborn.

Once spring arrived this year, PHSTC kicked things into high gear. "We held our first Arbor Day tree planting in Penn Hills Community Park on April 14," notes Raborn. "More than 60 people attended



PHOTOS BY PENN HILLS SHADE TREE COMMISSION



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and we gave away 50 Redbud tree seedlings. We also held another fundraiser on April 21. It took place at the Penn Hebron Garden Club Barn. We had two bands, a keg of beer, donated food, a gift basket raffle and 50/50 drawing. We raised \$1,400! It was more than we ever expected and it's allowed us to move forward on our biggest project, the Front Yard Tree Project."

She adds, "To understand why this particular project is so important to Penn Hills, or any neighborhood, it's important to know some of the benefits of trees. Trees retain a lot of water, which in turn keeps excess water from running into storm drains, which can then overflow into our sewage systems and dump into the Allegheny River. Also, trees remove carbon from the air, create oxygen, provide shade, increase and protect property values, attract residents and businesses, beautify landscapes and, it's been reported, reduce crime. For all of these reasons and more, the Front Yard Tree Project is where we're focusing our efforts over the next several years."

PHSTC members worked with GIS mapping to find an area in Penn Hills in desperate need of trees. They zeroed in on Veronica Drive. The street holds 122 houses and the goal was to plant 40 trees. "It was quite an undertaking," explains Raborn. "We went door to door asking residents if they would be interested in having a tree planted in their front yard for free. They were able to choose from seven varieties, all small ornamental trees that would not be a lot of maintenance. On May 12, we planted 25 trees we had purchased from Tree Pittsburgh and used our fundraising money to buy mulch and fencing at Lowe's. It was an amazing day and we're still available to plant the remaining 15 trees to whoever may want them on Veronica Drive."

The commission has a lot of ideas and areas of improvement to embark upon throughout 2018 and the coming years.

"I want to continue our Front Yard Tree Project one community at a time," says Raborn. "I'd also like the residents of Penn Hills to know how grateful we are for their support and volunteerism. If it wasn't for all of their time, hard work and physical labor, we wouldn't have had our successes to date."

To learn more about Penn Hills Shade Tree Commission, visit the group on Facebook or at pennhillsstc.org. ■



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