

City TREES

May/June 2026

Magazine of the Urban & Community Forestry Society



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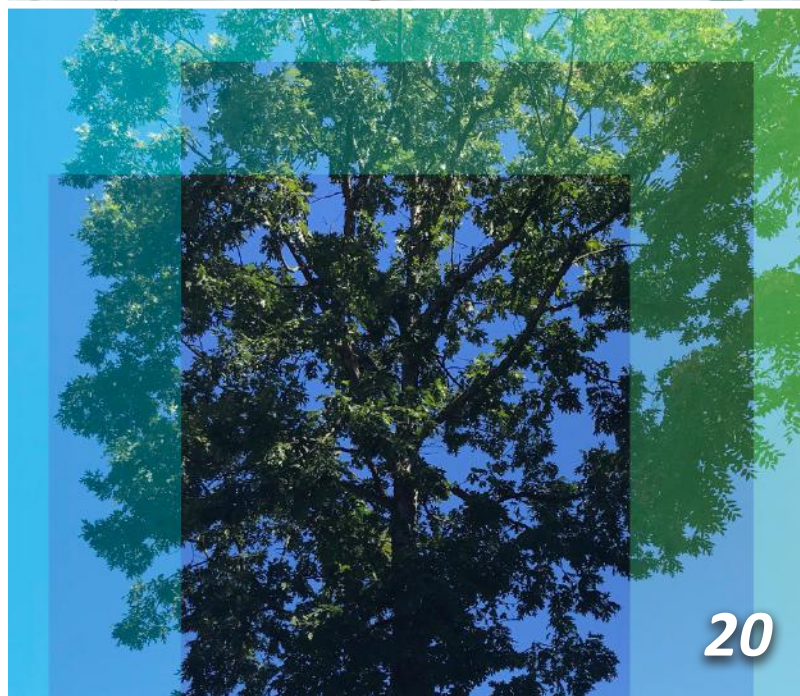
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Cover: Asha-Lé Davis unloads trees at a Pennsylvania Horticultural Society (PHS) tree planting event in Norristown, PA in fall 2024. Credit: Ris Productions, photo courtesy of PHS



President's Message

David Lefcourt



Late spring and early summer mark one of the most active and rewarding times in urban and community forestry. Across communities in the Northern Hemisphere, trees are leafing out, planting seasons are in full swing, and the impact of our collective work becomes highly visible. It's a time when planning meets action—when the strategies we've developed translate into healthier, more resilient urban forests.

This season also highlights the increasing complexity of our profession. We are not only planting and maintaining trees; we are addressing climate adaptation, managing risk, expanding canopy equity, and navigating the challenges of limited growing space and competing infrastructure. From species selection and soil health to community engagement and policy development, the work continues to evolve—and so must we.

As we look ahead, I encourage communities to take the next step in advancing their programs by pursuing UCFS Accreditation. It is more than a designation—it reflects a commitment to professional excellence, accountability, and continuous improvement. UCFS Accreditation also helps elevate the visibility and impact of your work within your community and across the profession.

Spring is also a time to recognize the partnerships that make this work possible. Whether collaborating with municipal leaders, nonprofits, volunteers, or residents, urban forestry succeeds through shared commitment. These relationships are essential as we work to ensure that the benefits of trees—shade, cooling, stormwater mitigation, and improved public health—are accessible to all.

I also encourage you to consider supporting the future of our profession through a contribution to the [Urban Forestry Foundation via Tree Fund](#). These investments help advance education and leadership development that benefit us all and strengthen the foundation of urban and community forestry.

Finally, 2026 UCFS Conference and Tradeshow planning is well underway. Our theme is "Practice Under Pressure." We look forward to bringing our community together this November in St. Louis, Missouri. It will be an opportunity to connect, learn, and share ideas that move our work forward. I hope to see many of you there.

Whichever season you find yourself in, take pride in the progress being made in your community while continuing to push forward innovative solutions. Invest in your professional growth, support your peers, and look for opportunities to engage the next generation of urban foresters. The challenges ahead are significant, but so is our capacity to meet them.

Executive Director's Message

Leslie Berckes



Are you a member of the Urban and Community Forestry Society? If yes, thank you! You're part of a vibrant community of professionals who know how to grow healthy trees where people live. We're so happy you're here!

If you're not a member, I hope you'll join soon. There are so many great ways to connect with the UCFS network; there's never been a better time to be with your people.

I know how it goes making the decision to buy that thing you've had your eye on or to finally become a member of something you've been interested in. Trust me, I can be a purchasing overthinker, opening the website five to ten times and looking for multiple reviews to validate my purchase. Some people might call this "analysis paralysis," but perhaps, more charitably, it's simply my way of discernment.

If you've been thinking about joining the Society, allow me to provide you with fodder as you go through your own process of discernment. Here are just a few things you'll experience as a member:

- A members-only hub where you can connect and chat with your fellow urban foresters.
- Discounts to UCFS educational experiences like our new CUFPP study groups, the Annual Conference, and the Municipal Forestry Institute.
- The ability to join committees and shape the future of urban forestry.
- The opportunity to support the Society that monitors urban forestry issues on your behalf and helps to be your voice.
- That feeling of being with people who know and understand you... one of the best feelings in the world!

Don't just take it from me, though. In this video, you can hear from a few of your peers who are members of the Society.



So, are you ready? There's power in being part of this community. [Make the decision to join today!](#)

STORIES PHOTOS TRAINING INDUSTRY EXPERTISE

TCI MAGAZINE
Official publication of the TREE CARE INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION

Your industry. Your expertise. Your story.

CONTRIBUTE

Today!

**Do you have a hard-won lesson from the field?
A technique worth sharing?
Photos or a video that tells the story of a day's work?**

TCI Magazine, the industry's leading trade publication, is looking for contributors who want to inform, inspire and engage their peers.



We welcome submissions from arborists, climbers, trainers, business owners, researchers, educators and advocates.

Whether you have a fully formed article, or just a spark of an idea, we want to hear from you!

Our goal is to publish content that's useful, credible and grounded in professional practice, while also reflecting the wide range of voices and experiences that make up today's tree care industry.

Submit ideas, articles, photos or reviews at tcimag.tcia.org/contribute



tcimag.tcia.org



Welcome New Members

Name	State/Province/Region	Country	Name	State/Province/Region	Country	Name	State/Province/Region	Country
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Adam Sepe	RI	USA	Cody Adams	GA	USA	Jacob Théorêt	QC	CAN
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Benjamin Morisseau	QC	CAN	Emma Thomson	MI	USA	John Theodore Martello	MD	USA
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Claire Royer	UT	USA	Jack Stasi	NY	USA	Kenda Templeton	NE	USA

Name	State/Province/Region	Country	Name	State/Province/Region	Country	Name	State/Province/Region	Country
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			Shay Willhite	OR	USA			



Not a Member?
**Apply for UCFS
 Membership
 Online Today!**



In This Issue: Contributors



Leslie Berckes is the Executive Director of UCFS. She has nearly 15 years of urban forestry experience that includes actively managing urban tree canopy as well as helping people grow trees where they are needed the most.



Owen Croy is an Adjunct Professor of Urban Forestry at the University of British Columbia and does urban forest advisory work for cities and towns. For twenty-five years he managed the park system for the City of Surrey, BC. He has served UCFS on the Board, MFI Education Facilitator Team, Editorial Review Committee, and in many other roles.



Asha-Lé Davis is based in Philadelphia, PA and serves as Education and Outreach Manager on the Trees Team of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society. She educates and empowers over 200 people per year from multiple generations to become Tree Tenders in their local communities through accessible learning modules. She is an ISA Certified Arborist, a 2025 MFI alum, and a member of UCFS.



Andy Hillman retired as the Northeast Regional Business Developer for Davey Resource Group. He is a past UCFS President and longtime member of the MFI Education Facilitator Team, and past President and current Board Member of the New York State Urban Forestry Council.



Luke Killoran is the City Forester for the City and County of Denver, working to keep urban and mountain forests healthy and growing. He's an ISA Board Certified Master Arborist, SAF Certified Urban & Community Forester, a 2024 MFI graduate, and a 2026 GCLI graduate. Luke also serves as the Site Leader for Saluting Branches at Fort Logan National Cemetery, supporting volunteer tree care in honor of veterans.

Visit our website

ucfsociety.org to learn about all things UCFS, including the Municipal Forestry Institute, Municipal Accreditation, our Arborist Exchange program, Annual Conference, and more.

Ready to be a UCFS Board Member?



The UCFS Nominations Committee seeks qualified UCFS Members to help the organization deliver on its mission to grow the competence, confidence, and camaraderie of all professionals who care for urban and community forests.

Would you or someone you know make a great board member for UCFS? Every day, our organization supports the people who make and support critical tree stewardship decisions across the globe. With the help of dynamic and involved board members, we can make an impact for the trees and people who depend on them.

Potential candidates must be a member in good standing (i.e. current on all memberships dues) for the last three years and have participated in or attended a UCFS-related activity or have served on a UCFS committee.

[More information](#) on the required qualifications, duties, and responsibilities of a UCFS Board Member, along with an application, can be found on the UCFS website.

Nominations close on September 1, 2026



During a break from the UCFS Board's strategic planning retreat, San Francisco Bureau of Urban Forestry and Public Works Director Carla Short showed Board Members the Bureau's new street tree nursery and shared about the City's forestry goals.

Nominate Someone Today for a UCFS Award!

The UCFS Conference Committee is seeking nominations for awards and honors that will be presented at the UCFS Conference luncheon on Tuesday, November 17, 2026. Nominations are an excellent way to recognize the hard work your colleagues do to oversee tree planting and care and/or for their contributions to education, research, and equity in our field. Take some time to think of a deserving candidate and nominate them today!

[More information](#) on the Award categories and a form to submit nominees can be found on the UCFS website.

Award nominations close August 28, 2026



UCFS News



- UCFS Accreditation, Conference Speaker, and CUFPP Study Group Opportunities
- MFI 2026: Return to Jekyll Island

By Leslie Berckes, UCFS Executive Director

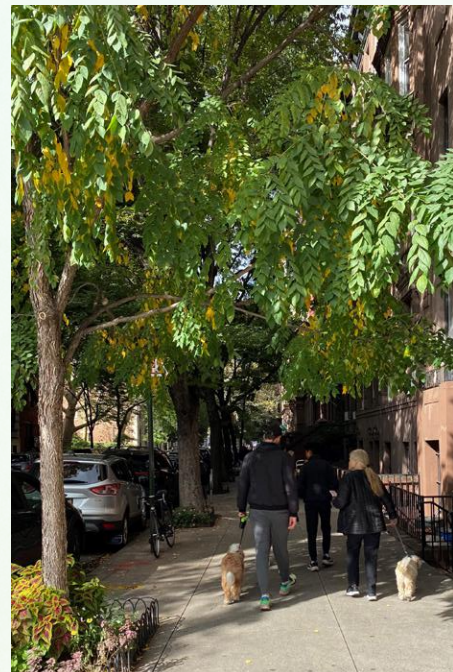
Opportunities with **YOU** in Mind

There are so many great ways to network and connect with UCFS!

Apply for the Accreditation Council

UCFS seeks candidates for its Accreditation Council. In this role, you'll guide Accreditation decisions, lead continuous improvement, and shape the future of urban forestry standards. Consider applying to make meaningful and lasting impact on the urban forestry profession.

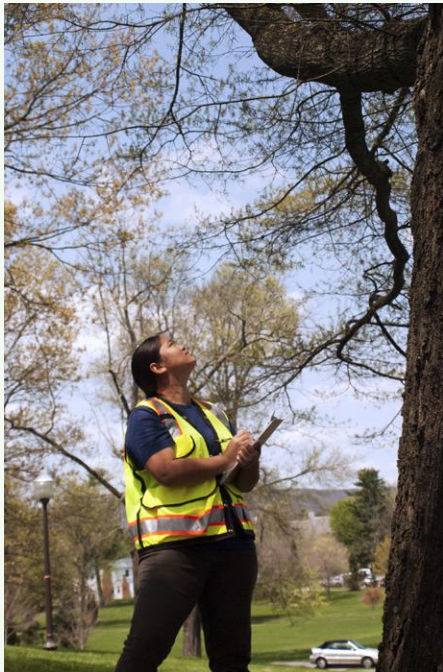
[UCFS Accreditation Council](#)



Submit an Annual Conference Proposal

We want to hear from you! Submit a conference presentation proposal and share with your fellow urban foresters how you successfully grow and care for trees. The 2026 UCFS Conference and Tradeshow will be November 16-17 in St. Louis, Missouri. Find out more and submit today!

UCFS Conference and Tradeshow



Ready to Become an ISA Certified Urban Forest Professional?

UCFS has you covered! Starting in May we'll host engaging study groups where you can connect with peers, learn from experienced urban foresters, and have access to a curated study resource list. Prepare together to pass the exam with confidence. Find out more and get started today!

UCFS Education & Certifications

MFI 2020

Return to Jekyll Island

By Leslie Berckes, UCFS Executive Director
Photos Courtesy of MFI Facilities



The Class of MFI 2026 gathers at Driftwood Beach.

6

Executive Director
Facilitators



In February, the UCFS Municipal Forestry Institute (MFI) was held for the second time on Jekyll Island, Georgia (the first was in 2024). Fifty-seven participants came together in this quiet, secluded location for a week of personal and professional growth.

MFI offers attendees a curriculum, honed over twenty years (see MFI 20-Year Anniversary feature in this issue), that helps them identify their personal values and professional style, understand the context in which they work, learn how to form partnerships and communicate goals, and find resilience to keep their work going. Each person comes with a specific project idea; with their peers and the education facilitators, attendees work to turn this idea into a fully formed action plan with goals, objectives, tasks, and performance indicators. With this, MFI grads are empowered to apply what they've learned back in their communities, contributing to our collective canopy goals in big and meaningful ways!

MFI attendees come from far and wide, representing many different people, roles, and places. At MFI 2026, they came from 26 U.S. states and Canada. Kevyn Boothe of McCall, Idaho shared this:

"MFI was such a great experience. It was inspiring to spend time with a group of such intelligent and caring people. I find a ton of comfort in knowing there are people across the country, in nearly every community, advocating and caring for trees. Coming from a rural area in Idaho, I did not know how I would identify and connect with urban foresters. To my surprise, I don't think I have ever felt more aligned with a group of people."

As evidenced by Kevyn's quote, MFI attendees tend to forge a powerful bond; the network built at MFI is one of the hallmarks of the Institute. We hope you enjoy the photos and reflections in the pages that follow. You can get reminders for next year's MFI by completing the [MFI 2027 Interest Form](#). If you would like to take your career and personal wellbeing to a new level, we hope you will apply!



MFI in pictures



The 2026 MFI class enthusiastically starts its first MFI learning session.



MFI 2026 Education Facilitators, clockwise from lower left: Leslie Berckes, Carolina Arango, Darren Green, Mike Martini, John O'Neil, Michelle Cole, Karla Nagy, and Casey Jogerst (in center).



MFI Attendees Nicholas Zito (left) and Michael Wolfe.



A Peer Learning Group supports one another's work on tackling goals for their programs.

Peer Learning Groups meet outside to practice negotiation skills during one of their sessions.





See Dr. Mark Johnston's 2025 ISA-New Zealand Conference Keynote

Planting Ideas in the URBAN FOREST

Last October, Dr. Mark Johnston gave the keynote address at the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA) 2025 Annual Conference, held in New Zealand. He says, "I was able to take delegates on a personal and inspiring journey through the past, present, and future of the urban forestry movement, including developments in the U.S., Canada, Europe, Asia and elsewhere. Included in this was my enthusiastic support for the reworking of the Society of Municipal Arborists as the Urban and Community Forestry Society and for the new ISA Certified Urban Forest Professional credential. These comments elicited loud applause! I hope *City TREES* readers who couldn't attend will enjoy the keynote on [YouTube](#)."

—Dr. Mark Johnston MBE, FArborA (Hon), FCIHort, FICFor;
Independent scholar: arboriculture, landscape and urban forestry based in Belfast, Northern Ireland. www.markjohnstontrees.com

City Trees is the online, bimonthly magazine produced by the Urban & Community Forestry Society. The UCFS is a Professional Affiliate of the International Society of Arboriculture.

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Holding an ISA Certified Urban Forest Professional credential is a sign to the public, employers, and peers that you have the urban forestry experience and fundamental knowledge and skills needed to manage community trees.

Earning this title shows your professional commitment to a code of ethics and fulfillment of best management practices and industry-accepted standards in the field.

Now's the time!

Click here to find out how you can stand out from the crowd!

Talking Points

The Benefits of Urban & Community Forests

Thank you to the Sustainable Urban Forests Coalition for giving us permission to share this with City TREES readers. The Talking Points reference the U.S. but have wider applicability.



SUSTAINABLE
URBAN
FORESTS
COALITION

Like working forests in rural landscapes, trees in all communities (lining neighborhood streets, in parks, along roadways and streams, and in yards) are working hard every day to provide valuable benefits. These natural capital resources augment the value of other types of infrastructure and offer flexible and cost-effective solutions to a wide variety of infrastructure-related issues. **The following talking points may be helpful in your outreach and discussions.**

Urban Forests are a critical tool for fighting urban heat.

Heat kills nearly 2000 people/year in the U.S.; trees are natural air conditioning and help to cool urban heat islands.

The threat of extreme heat across all regions of the country is a growing concern:

- In 2024, the impacts of extreme heat cost the U.S. an estimated \$162 billion—equivalent to nearly 1% of the US GDP. ([Federation of American Scientists](#), 2025)
- Extreme heat not only represents a national economic crisis, it also kills more Americans every year than hurricanes, floods, and tornadoes combined. ([CDC](#), 2020)
- Extreme heat is most dangerous for children, seniors, people who work outside, and those with chronic conditions, but the quality of life for Americans is impacted when temperatures make it unsafe to go outside.
- Trees also reduce air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions from the rising need for air conditioning. ([EPA](#))
- As nature's air conditioning, trees can potentially cool homes and neighborhoods as much as 20 °F (11.1 °C) or more. ([American Forests](#), 2024) >>



Photo by Michelle Sutton

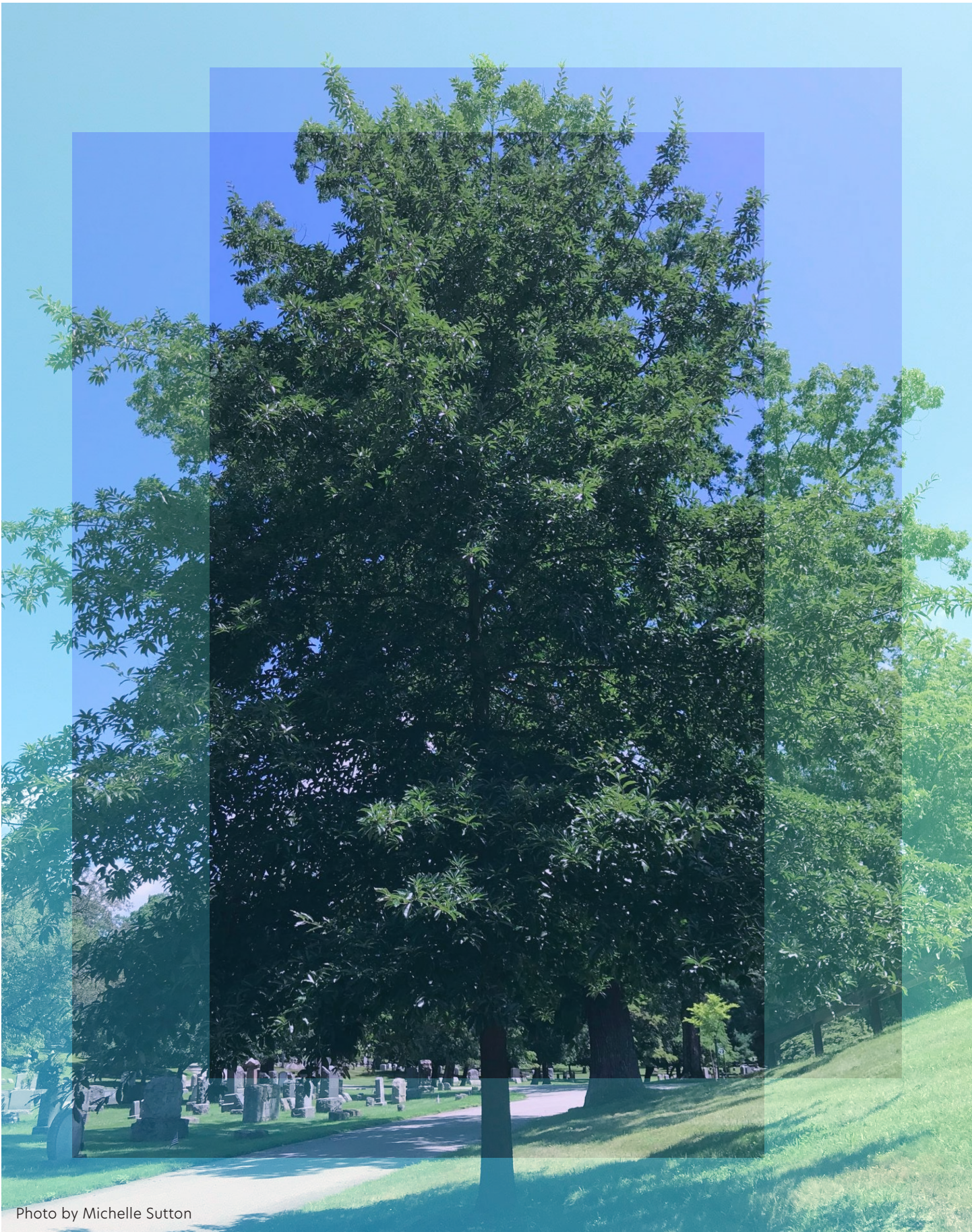


Photo by Michelle Sutton

Urban forests are essential for public health.

Explain how they improve air quality, reduce stress, and provide spaces for physical activity.

- Research has shown that tree-lined parks and large numbers of trees along streets help to reduce these illnesses by reducing air pollution, lowering stress, and encouraging more exercise, thus reducing health care costs. ([BMJ](#), 2005)
- Evidence indicates that exposure to green spaces could result in a multitude of health benefits and reduced mortality, with studies associating green spaces with reduced cardiovascular disease, better mental health, lower stress, immune system benefits, and improved pregnancy outcomes. ([Rojas-Rueda et al](#), 2019)

Investing in urban forests creates economic and community benefits.

How they can increase property values, reduce energy costs, and provide jobs in conservation and maintenance.

- Trees offer significant economic value to homeowners and real estate investors by boosting property values. Homes with trees in their yard enjoy property value increases of more than \$30 billion, annually, in the U.S. ([Arbor Day Foundation](#), 2021)
- A tree-lined neighborhood attracts new residents, businesses, and tourists and helps to deter crime, further fueling local economies. ([City of Reno, Benefits of the Urban Forest](#))([Kuo & Sullivan](#), 2001)
- Trees also help mitigate extreme weather and disaster impacts while protecting surrounding built infrastructure, which saves taxpayer dollars and preserves resources for national priorities. The value and benefits grow year after year, making planting and caring for community trees a truly wise investment for the public and private sector alike. ([Arbor Day Foundation](#), 2021)
- Urban forestry is not just an environmental necessity; it is also a robust economic strategy for fostering sustainable growth and domestic job creation. As populations expand, the need for urban and community forests increases, as does the need for trained individuals to help develop and maintain healthy and resilient urban forests in communities of all sizes. ([Parajuli et al](#), 2023)
- Currently, the need for skilled labor to manage and care for trees has never been higher. There are tens of thousands of job opportunities in communities large and small across the country for local workers of all experience levels—jobs that cannot be shipped elsewhere. ([Nair et al](#), 2009)
- Tree Maintenance and Care: Urban forestry supports a range of industries, including tree planting, pruning, removal, and pest management, which provide jobs for arborists, foresters, laborers, landscapers, and urban foresters. ([NIP Group](#), 2023)
- Nurseries: The demand for trees drives economic activity in nurseries, garden centers, and landscaping companies. ([HRI](#), 2020)
- The emerging urban wood economy presents a unique opportunity to harness the economic power of local resources, create sustainable high quality local jobs, and support and grow industries while reducing municipal disposal costs. By focusing on utilizing local resources, urban wood programs can generate employment opportunities for skilled workers in wood processing, manufacturing, and renewable energy. ([Nowak](#), 2019) 🌳



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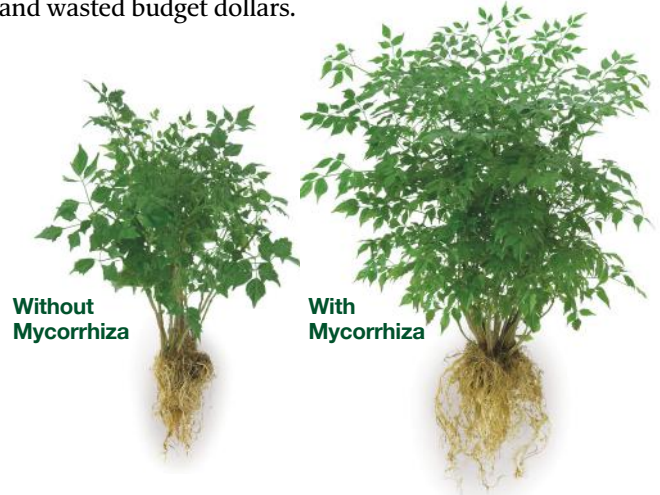
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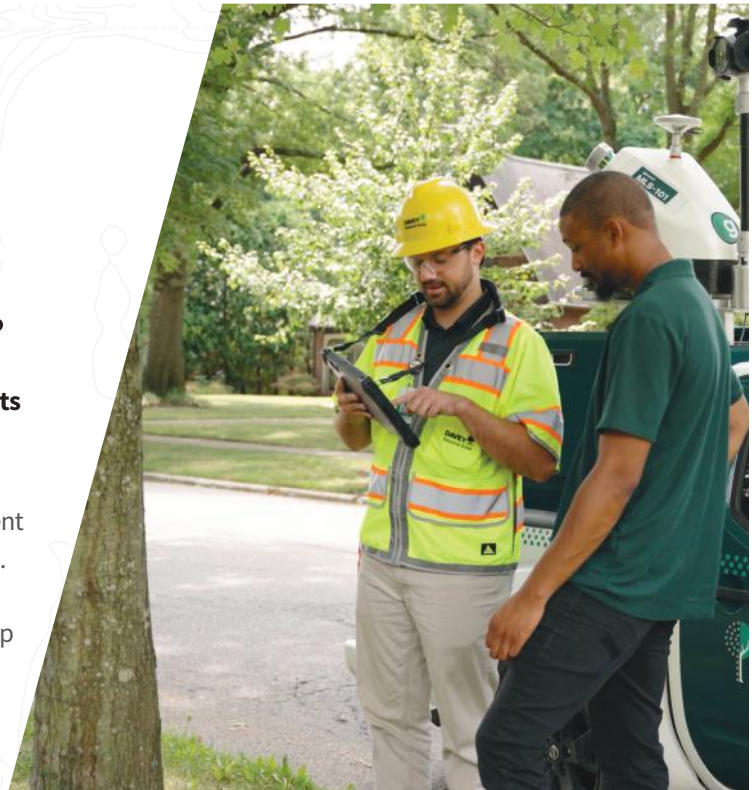
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MFI 20th Anniversary

The first Municipal Forestry Institute (MFI) took place in 2006. To celebrate 20 years of MFI, we hear from the following folks:

- Founding MFI Education Facilitator **Owen Croy** sets the MFI table for us and shares from the heart about what teaching has meant to him.
- MFI 2025 grad and now MFI Peer Coach **Asha-Lé Davis** talks about what her involvement means to her, how her feedback has been received, and where she's headed.
- Founding MFI Education Facilitator and noted storyteller **Andy Hillman** tells great stories from his many years at MFI.
- MFI 2024 grad **Luke Killoran** shares how MFI helped propel him more confidently forward to a new position, and how his MFI network now helps him face challenges for the major city he works for.

From the Jump: **MFI Reflections from Owen Croy**



[Owen Croy](#) served as an MFI Education Facilitator (formerly known as MFI Teaching Cadre member) from 2006 through 2022. He retired after 25 years with the City of Surrey, British Columbia, primarily as Manager of Parks. Croy has been an adjunct professor in the UBC Forestry Faculty for 11 years; he taught the Introduction to Urban Forestry course to international students in the UBC summer program for many years. He now co-teaches Intro to Arboriculture, provides instruction for the urban forestry field school, and gives occasional guest lectures for the Master of Urban Forestry Leadership program. He also does urban forestry consulting for cities and other municipalities.

Reflections

OWEN CROY:

In 2005, [Paul Ries](#) recruited an organizing group [see sidebar] to brainstorm a leadership institute related to managing municipal forests. In the early years, Paul played a crucial role in articulating the curriculum that would become what was originally known as the Municipal *Forester* Institute. The first iteration of MFI was in 2006 in Lake Arrowhead, California and had a teaching cadre of 13 with 77 participants. Originally, MFI was laid out expressly for city foresters, urban foresters, or municipal arborists. Over time, the range of affiliated professionals that wanted to participate expanded greatly, so it became clear that Municipal *Forestry* Institute would be more accurate.

The original curriculum was built on a personal-professional-program growth model. The original goals of MFI were to:

1. Enhance leadership skills of municipal urban foresters;
2. Stimulate interest in individual certification and promote municipal program accreditation; and
3. Foster more sustainable local urban forestry programs.

As designed in 2005, the themes of MFI, aligning under the goals, were:

1. Developing a leadership approach to your position;
2. Strategic planning;
3. Working effectively with boards, committees, coalitions, and non-profits;
4. Growing and enhancing an urban forestry program; and
5. Managing the relationship between people and trees.

Goal #5 was/is especially important to me. Most urban foresters get academic training in the science of trees; however, people are much harder to understand. As a leader in Surrey, I found that planting trees and managing contracts and operations was the easy part. Managing people as they related to trees—that was the really, really difficult part. I learned a lot >>



Original Teaching Cadre for MFI

Lloyd Burridge

Keith Cline

Owen Croy

John Giedraitis

George Gonzalez

Andy Hillman

Mike Kuhns

Jerri LaHaie

Dana Karcher

Melanie Kirk

Paul Ries

Jim Skiera

Walter Warriner

Source:
City TREES, May/June 2006



I found that planting trees and managing contracts and operations was the easy part. Managing people as they related to trees—that was the really, really difficult part.



Owen at the ancient Olive tree of Vouves, estimated to be 3500 years old. Cuttings from the tree were used to make crowns for the winning marathon runners when Greece hosted the Olympic Games in 2004.

about this from the school of hard knocks. I wanted to convey to young and emerging professionals at MFI the importance of learning to work with people, from homeowners to nonprofit staff to boards and political figures to city engineers, planners, and landscape architects. All of these people are involved in the delivery of urban forestry programs—whether they understand it or not.

The original MFI program delivery was set up with 1) lectures; 2) small group work (3-4 persons); and 3) Peer Learning Groups (PLGs). Originally, MFI included seven weeks of pre-Institute work. Over time we moved away from lectures to having participants spend more time in PLGs and other small group discussions facilitated by instructors. That made things more engaging for attendees, and we found we could still meet our goals with this change in delivery.

Over the years, it got back to me how many MFI participants saw considerable career growth in their organization after attending, or made big changes in their professional or personal lives to better align with their personal values and goals, like taking a job with a different organization. I've stayed in touch with many MFI graduates—we became true colleagues over the course of the week—and I use the MFI network to ask questions when I can't find answers anywhere else.

Preparing for MFI made me a better urban forester; it gave me a deeper understanding of the subject and pushed me to stay at the top of my game. This was meaningful for me personally and helped prepare me for my adjunct professor role. For these reasons, I used personal time to attend, and I looked forward to MFI every year. The teaching cadre met a couple of days in advance on site. After a full week, I would be drained physically and emotionally but also energized to go back to Surrey and apply new concepts to my work.

I was hired by the City of Surrey to start an urban forestry program. Our city grew fast and within two years, I moved up to a director level, which meant I no longer managed the urban forest; I managed the people who managed the urban forestry program. Teaching at MFI was a way I stayed in touch with what was happening in the urban forestry world. I really did learn a lot from my colleagues, especially Paul Ries. He was instrumental in showing me the value of developing curriculum, in part by how he went about creating one for MFI.

Something that MFI taught me was that people who identify as introverts can have a deep understanding of things. They're not the first to speak, so I learned to do more listening and create an environment where they'd feel comfortable enough to talk. Another important thing that I learned over the years of the cadre working together was about trusting one another in teams and how beneficial that can be. We had to pivot on a moment's notice sometimes, like when a member of the teaching team was unable at the last minute to come, we leaned on one another to cover that person's material. We saw the same sorts of dynamics with folks working in PLGs—how trust built over time made for better delivery of services and programs in hypothetical scenarios that mirror what graduates face back home in their work.



Owen and Sheena hiking on the Path of the Gods on the Amalfi Coast in Italy.



Rising Star in the MFI Constellation: **Asha-Lé Davis**

[Asha-Lé Davis](#) (MFI 2025) is the Education and Outreach Manager for the [Pennsylvania Horticulture Society](#) (PHS). Among her many roles, she coordinates education and training for the Tree Tenders program founded more than 30 years ago by Mindy Maslin. For a five-county region in greater Philadelphia, Tree Tenders engages people with the planting and care of street trees where they live. PHS trains 200 Tree Tenders a year who go on to lead volunteers in planting more than 2,000 trees annually. Notably, PHS was a key stakeholder in the development of the [Philly Tree Plan](#)—the first-ever comprehensive, citywide strategic plan for Philadelphia’s urban forest, released in 2023.

Davis oversees the ongoing education of Tree Tenders, including those who are planting crew leaders for the bare root tree planting program; summer tree monitoring ([Tree Checkers](#)) program volunteers; and young-tree pruners who work with ISA Certified Arborists. PHS has received a grant from the Trust for Public Land for Davis to develop age-appropriate curriculum and Tree Tender training delivery for grades 3-5 and 6-8. The training is geared toward engaging the students in better stewardship of their schoolyard installations. Davis is also passionate about finding ways to limit barriers in access to education for those who experience transportation and scheduling constraints.

ASHA-LÉ DAVIS:

My BS degree and first career was in Culinary Arts; I was a pastry chef and earned a graduate Certificate of Advanced Management. At some point I realized I wanted to make a career change; I was hired by [Tree Philly](#), a program of Philadelphia Parks and Recreation, as a seasonal program coordinator. That was a great crash course in urban forestry, doing things like working with community organizations to host yard tree giveaways in priority communities lacking canopy. TreePhilly is where I met one of my mentors, Erica Smith Fichman, who is the first Philadelphia City Forester. Around that time, I went through the PHS Tree Tenders course, volunteered, loved it, and eventually was hired by PHS in 2021—first as a Trees Specialist, then as Trees Program Manager, and now as Education and Outreach Manager.

Erica Smith Fichman (MFI 2013) and another mentor of mine, Dana Dentice (MFI 2016) encouraged me to go to MFI, as did my dear friends and colleagues Lee Scottlorde (MFI 2022) and Kate Illes (MFI 2024), both from TreePhilly. My top goal heading into MFI (2025, in Scotts Valley, California) was networking, followed closely

behind by expanding my knowledge, and learning about what people are doing elsewhere in the U.S. and internationally. One person I was really excited to meet and talk with was Fred Chalfant, Urban Forester at Tree Baltimore. I'm a huge fan of Fred's, he's a legend! In Philadelphia we study what Baltimore is doing closely and vice versa. We have adopted some of Tree Baltimore's very successful program models. It was so great to meet Fred in person and geek out together about programming.

MFI felt like a great fit for me from the beginning. I was thinking, "This is incredible ... you're teaching the trainers, and where else can you connect this many people in the field, be together day in and day out, and build this network?" I knew I wanted to continue to be involved with MFI in a deeper way, so before the week ended, I told Leslie that I want to be an MFI Education Facilitator in the future and asked how I could start preparing myself for that role. She was receptive and encouraging and told me that she had been mulling over the idea of a peer coach for MFI. >>

★ *I greatly appreciated Asha-Lé's gumption in reaching out to Leslie about her desire to be more involved with MFI. It spurred our interest in creating an MFI alumni Peer Coach role. Asha-Lé has been a huge support to me personally, taking time to meet regularly and being a sounding board for elements of MFI that we wanted to change, adapt, and improve. She was actively involved in developing the lesson plan for the Peer Learning Group sessions and action plan assignment. When she attended the virtual Pre-Institute (PI) sessions and shared her personal experience completing the PI assignments, she gave the participants real-life experience, support, and someone they could relate to. I thank Asha-Lé for helping us make specific improvements that proved very successful at MFI 2026.*

—**Karla Nagy**, UCFS Program and Education Manager



Asha-Lé Davis (second from left) with best friends during a trip to Washington, D.C.

By late summer, I sat in on pre-MFI meetings as a peer coach, sharing my experiences as a recent MFI graduate and answering peer questions. I tried to put people at ease. Some of them contacted me individually, worrying about the central Big Hairy Audacious Goal (BHAG) project, asking me things like, “Am I doing this right? Is this what they’re looking for? Is this meant to be something I implement right away?” I remember vividly having those same questions when I was facing the BHAG for the first time and calling my mentors who were MFI alums. To the incoming participants, I found myself saying, “Don’t be too hard on yourself.” It’s understandable that perfectionism does get stoked when you have people who are serious and committed in their jobs and have made a big investment of time and money to attend MFI. It is 100% worth it, though.

I also began a curriculum advisory role with [UCFS Program and Education Manager, and longtime MFI Education Facilitator] Karla Nagy. I’m nerdy about accessible, conscious, and engaging education, and Karla is, too. I give Leslie, Karla, and the MFI Education Facilitators a lot of credit because they were open to my sharing feedback I’d heard from peers about how MFI could even better meet their needs. For example, how some of my 2025 cohort wished there was less lecture time and more time for participants to learn from each other. But how to create that space while maintaining the goals and integrity of the program and also recognizing the hard work that the facilitators have put into it?

Karla invited me to review the MFI curriculum with her and showed me, “Ok, these are the sessions that

are locked in, but here are some others that have wiggle room.” We looked together at how there could be more room for small group breakouts outside the Peer Learning Groups (PLGs). I also shared some of the ways in which my brain works as background to why I completed some of the pre-Institute assignments in a format that made more sense to me than the one that was suggested. With Karla, I even felt empowered to share a few suggestions I had for her talk on community engagement. I truly appreciate how open Karla and the whole MFI Education Facilitators team have been to my input. Whether or not my ideas are enacted upon at this time, or at a later time, or to some degree—I do feel heard and valued.

On the social and networking side, three highlights of my MFI experience come to mind. The first was connecting with the other Black women present (Evette Browning, Kelly Hicks-Holloway, and Astrid Wogwugwu; Astrid also works in Philadelphia) and setting up a group chat with them and MFI Education Facilitator

To the incoming participants, I found myself saying, “Don’t be too hard on yourself.” It’s understandable that perfectionism does get stoked when you have people who are serious and committed in their jobs.

Michelle Cole. There aren’t many Black women in the urban forestry field, so community becomes extra important, because it can be easy to feel impostor syndrome if you’re working in spaces where you’re not represented. When the pressure of work can be extra high, like in spring and fall planting season, we in the group chat are checking in with one another.

The second highlight is a conversation I had with Michelle Cole and Ian Appow, who both do consulting work along with their day jobs. I really plied them for information because ultimately, I’d like to work as an urban and community forestry education consultant. Michelle and Ian suggested I think about what gap or niche in the UCF education world I could fill. The third highlight was Portland-based Nik Desai from my Peer Learning Group connecting me to Portland Parks and Recreation Education Specialist Marissa Richerson. She and I have been meeting every other month and sharing what we’re doing in our programs; it’s been incredible and we’ve formed a wonderfully supportive friendship.



Asha-Lé Davis at left with her sister and father after her sister’s musical performance at a local theater.

From the Jump: **MFI Reflections from Andy Hillman**

Now an environmental consultant, [Andy Hillman](#) has worked in urban forestry for 40 years, first for Oswego Public Works, then as Ithaca, New York City Forester, and more recently, as the Northeast Region Business Developer for Davey Resource Group. Throughout his career, Hillman has been intimately involved with both UCFS (formerly, SMA) and with the New York State Urban Forestry Council (NYSUFC)—serving for each as President, Board Member, and conference host, among other roles. He was one of the original MFI organizing group members and taught at the Institute from 2006-2022.

ANDY HILLMAN:

I'm struck by how many of the NYSUFC presidents are MFI grads, in part thanks to Council scholarships. Current President Lori Brockelbank and past presidents Steve Harris, Karen Emmerich, and David Moore are all MFI grads, and I (in a teaching cadre role) served multiple terms as Council president. By extension that means that MFI has influenced all of New York State's urban and community forestry activities. We also saw that with Texas and California; when MFI was most recently held at Lake Arrowhead, John Melvin helped arrange for approximately 30 California professionals to attend. When it took place in the Texas Hill Country in 2008 in New Braunfels, we had 24 Texans in the MFI class thanks to the efforts of John Giedraitis and colleagues.

I loved Lake Arrowhead, the original MFI site. I still remember the cedar wood smell in our dwelling units, which were like little chalets with fireplaces. The retreat center was in the San Bernardino Mountains, away from everything. All around us were naturalized giant sequoias (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*). Like a Hobbit land. We organizers felt two foundational things about the venues were important—that they be in someplace remote and/or quiet so there wouldn't be a lot of distractions, and that the food had to be good! Lied Lodge in Nebraska City, on the beautiful Arbor Day Foundation grounds, had an incredible chef; we were lucky to spend several years there. But really, we've always had great food.

Right from the start, I could tell we were on to something special. I came to believe that you could get a

positive outcome if you took a whole bunch of urban foresters and sequestered them in the right setting—like Gulf Shores, Alabama, or Silverton, Oregon—and fed them well. The sessions were great, but really MFI was more about getting all those intelligent, passionate tree professionals together and starting to talk and mix and exchange info and ideas. That was really the basis of the program's magic. I will always be grateful for the MFI experience and the fantastic people I was so fortunate to meet. It was an honor to be a part of the teaching cadre.

A Gumby doll was our mascot from early on. Semper Gumby (“Always Flexible”) was an excellent slogan for MFI, meaning it's best to go with the flow and not get too upset if things didn't go exactly as planned. It's human nature to miscalculate, so we can't be rigid or perfectionist in our ways. Semper Gumby was a helpful shorthand for the MFI experience and beyond.

One of the coolest things about MFI is the Wednesday evening fireside chat. It started with John Rosenow, previous Executive Director of the Arbor Day Foundation (ADF). He had a lot of gravitas. We dimmed the lights, and John told of his leadership journey, about founding ADF and the organization's challenges and successes. That was an experiment that became a tradition. The last time we were at Lake Arrowhead, former Los Angeles Urban Forester George Gonzalez offered a fireside chat that engaged everyone there. (If I recall correctly, George is one of the three people—along with Walt Warriner and Dana Karcher—who gathered at Walt's table and >>



Andy Hillman with his dogs, Brownie (foreground) and Minnie Pearl (in shadow).

kicked around ideas that would lead to the founding of MFI.) I would love to do that someday—go to MFI for a fireside chat and share what I’ve learned about leadership over the course of my career.

When Paul Ries and former SMA Director Jerri LaHaie joined, Paul took the reins on curriculum, while Jerri took the admin role. I remember bringing ideas for a session to Paul and no matter how crazy they were, he’d simply ask, “Does that fit the curriculum?” At the time, the MFI curriculum was ostensibly meant to help prepare folks for taking the then-called Municipal Specialist—now, Certified Urban Forest Professional—exam. MFI was about much more than that, of course. Its purpose from the beginning was to help participants develop a leadership mentality. Paul brought concepts like the “team of three”—the critical value of having a mentor, a mentee, and a peer to consult with.

I remember teaching at MFI in February 2020 when it took place in Gulf Shores, Alabama. That was special for me because it was a return; I lived down Pensacola way when I served in the Navy. A lot of nostalgia. Our lecture room had a fantastic view of the Gulf. MFI coincided with Mardi Gras in 2020, as it often did. That year, Mardi Gras became an early COVID superspreader event. What’s amazing is that of our MFI group, no one got COVID, even though we were so many people in a tight space. I think the insulated nature of MFI helped keep us safe.

MFI was one of the best experiences of my career. I loved it and still believe in the leadership training it delivers. When I go to the UCFS Conference, I look forward to the MFI Reunion perhaps most of all. People have built relationships over two decades of MFI and stay in contact. The MFI Reunions get bigger each year!

Recently a photo popped up in my feed from MFI 2018 in Litchfield, Connecticut. The venue was a former convent, and we all thought the place seemed a little haunted. Right across the road was a sugar shack fed by tubing running through a maple forest; a lot of MFIs had never seen a sugar shack operation, so that was super fun. The Connecticut Tree Wardens showed up and gave us a big welcome—the most amiable hosts. They brought local products to the Thursday night social, and we all cut loose a little.

The sessions were great, but really MFI was more about getting all those intelligent, passionate tree professionals together and starting to talk and mix and exchange info and ideas.



Andy Hillman at right with longtime friend and colleague Doug Still, host of the [This Old Tree podcast and radio show](#). Both are UCFS Past Presidents and have contributed extensively to the Society over decades.

Rising Star in the MFI Constellation: **Luke Killoran**

Luke Killoran attended MFI 2024 on Jekyll Island, Georgia after being encouraged to attend by his UCFS mentor, John McNeil—a member of the MFI Education Facilitator team for many years. Killoran was then-City Forester for Lakewood, Colorado—the fifth most populous city in the state. Going into MFI, he quietly wished to apply to be Denver’s City Forester when the position became open. (Colorado’s capital, Denver is the state’s most populous city.) Not long after graduating from MFI, the position did become open, and Killoran got the job!



LUKE KILLORAN:

I was very fortunate to have my mentor, John McNeil, inspire me to apply for MFI and support me through the application process. I was also fortunate that Lakewood, Colorado Parks Director Jim Haselgren encouraged my participation at MFI. I was most excited about the opportunity to network, along with personal and professional development. I’m thankful that John encouraged me to be as present and engaged as possible to get the most out of the MFI experience.

Before MFI I was aware that the Denver City Forester position would be opening at some point, but I didn’t know exactly when. When the position became open, I was thankful that I had MFI on my resume to show my commitment to the profession and to investing in myself. Going through MFI further emboldened me to apply for the Denver City Forester position.

One epiphany moment I had during MFI was, “Wow, I’m not alone in this position.” I certainly had that awareness before—through being involved with nonprofits

like Colorado Arborists and Lawn Care Professionals (CALCP) and the Colorado Tree Coalition (CTC)—but being together at MFI all week and having heart-to-heart conversations with passionate people ... it was a whole new level of community. It was super comforting to make friends there that I continue to bounce things off of, like fellow Colorado foresters Malesa Plumley and Christine Holtz; both are Senior Specialists in Forestry from Fort Collins.

I also really connected with John O’Neil of Washington D.C./DDOT Urban Forestry and an MFI Education Facilitator. He gave presentations at MFI that really stuck with me. When I started at the City of Denver, the City had recently passed a bill, voted in by Denver residents, for a new sidewalk program. The project proposes 1200 miles (1931 km) of new and replacement sidewalks, which will conflict directly with many trees in Denver’s urban forest. To be proactive about this, I reached out to John O’Neil and asked, “How did you handle this [type of situation]? What are the things >>



Luke Killoran (at left) with his Peer Learning Group at MFI 2024, Jekyll Island, Georgia.

One epiphany moment I had during MFI was, “Wow, I’m not alone in this position.”

Being together at MFI all week and having heart-to-heart conversations with passionate people... it was a whole new level of community.

I need to consider? What are possible solutions for the conflicts I foresee, especially in historic neighborhoods, or around mature trees?” John was really helpful in providing perspective and resources.

Another topic on my mind is that the City of Denver owns the public right-of-way trees, but we rely on the adjacent property owners to maintain them. We don't currently have the capacity or means to prune or provide plant health care to all of the approximately 200,000 trees in our public right-of-way in addition to 100,000 trees in our public parks or on public properties that my team is responsible for. I would really love for us to move to a City-led tree care model so that the urban forest is managed in a more consistent, responsible way for a healthier urban forest and community. In the spirit of MFI, you could say addressing how public tree care is done in Denver is my Big Hairy Audacious Goal—and not mine alone: the goal being for Denver to move from resident-care to City-care of the right-of-way trees. It's not going to happen tomorrow, but it's something that we're talking about. As a conscientious, professional urban forestry team, we see many reasons to do it.

My favorite session at MFI was the tradeoff exercise/ game. During this session, different folks in our Peer Learning Group represented different roles including city forester, nonprofits, members of the public, and other entities navigating a proposed project that would impact city trees. It was so very similar to the work I do now, navigating all the competing interests. That was tons of fun—I learned a lot from that exercise.

The timing of MFI for me was really critical in that I was prepared for it, I wasn't distracted, and it was a good time in my life to do it. I've brought MFI up with several of my staff members who are looking for

growth and directional movement, as are so many people in our field. I believe MFI is a valuable stepping stone for young professionals and those looking to advance their careers. Recently, I discovered the Green Communities Leadership Institute (GCLI); by the time folks read this I will have attended the GCLI in March 2026. I saw GCLI as a continuation of the personal and professional development I experienced at MFI. Lastly, I wanted to say that [UCFS Executive Director] Leslie Berckes has been an important contact for me; I appreciate her support and am thankful for her friendship. 🌱

Luke Killoran with his wife Alie, son Forest, and family dog Big Mac at Lake Granby, Colorado.





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