

Tree Trust's impact is deeply rooted

Twin Cities nonprofit has planted more than 700,000 trees and trained hundreds of young people to be arborists and landscapers.

By [Editorial Board](#) Star Tribune

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GLEN STUBBE, STAR TRIBUNE

Tree Trust worker Leah O'Leary gently cuts into the root ball of an elm tree before planting it at Case Recreation Center in St. Paul in 2020.

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Rolf Svendsen was a University of Minnesota grad student working a summer job in the mid-1970s when he began to wonder how Minneapolis could reclaim the neglected and unkempt waterfront near St. Anthony Falls.

Svendsen's boss, then-Minneapolis City Coordinator Tommy Thompson, said they could tap some federal job-training money to hire unemployed youth. "How about if I give you 100 teenagers?" Thompson asked.

Svendsen put the young people to work clearing trails, constructing timber steps and planting trees, creating Mississippi River access still visible today near St. Anthony Main. But that summer gave Svendsen the inspiration for a larger and more enduring strategy. In 1976, he approached Don Willeke, a Minneapolis attorney active in the national urban forestry movement, and they turned Svendsen's idea into a nonprofit corporation called [Tree Trust](#). It began with a simple but brilliant mission: Beautify the metro area's green spaces by hiring low-income teenagers for summer jobs while training them in landscaping and forestry. Nearly five decades later, Tree Trust has left an [extraordinary imprint](#) on the Twin Cities: It has planted more than 700,000 trees, trained hundreds of young people to be arborists and landscapers, [provided](#) low-cost nursery saplings to hundreds of homeowners and beautified scores of parks and trails across the metro area.

As the planet grows warmer, Minnesota should look for ways to embrace and expand on the Tree Trust model. What seemed like an ingenious little project in 1976 has an ever more urgent mission in the era of climate change. Trees cool the air and sequester carbon. By shading homes and businesses, they reduce our use of air conditioning and electricity.

New research shows that trees can even address Minnesota's grievous health disparities. A growing number of studies show that poor neighborhoods are hotter than affluent ones — because they have fewer trees — which can lead to higher levels of asthma, kidney disease and other heat-related ailments.

By some measures, an urban tree is 14 times more valuable than one planted in the woods, Willeke told an editorial writer. Trees reduce smog, absorb rainfall and reduce polluted runoff to streams and lakes, and cool hot urban air through what's known as evapotranspiration.

Minnesota has dozens of other ingenious nonprofits that support children, beautify parks, help settle refugees, assist people with disabilities and in countless other ways make this state a better place to leave to our children. But it can always use a few more.

Oh, and Tree Trust leaves another lesson valuable in our time. Svendsen was a Republican member of the Minneapolis Park Board at the organization's founding; Willeke was an ardent Democrat. Yet they found common ground around a shared passion.

Jared Smith, the current CEO of Tree Trust, says he continues to take inspiration from their partnership and entrepreneurial spirit. "Let's link arms and get things done."

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