CASEY TREES

This is the story of Casey Trees and a series of serendipitous events that profoundly changed my life, the city of Washington, DC, and the urban forestry movement in this country. As a result, The Garden Club of America committed to undertaking the largest and most impactful project in its history.

I was attending the GCA Annual Meeting in Cleveland as the Zone VI horticulture representative in the spring of 2000. As I was waiting for the meeting to start, GCA President Bobbie Hanson waved me to the dais. The GCA had been approached by a philanthropist, Betty Brown Casey, who was offering an initial donation of $1 million to an organization that would undertake the task of combating tree loss in Washington, DC. I told Bobbie I would find out what was happening and get back to her.

My sources revealed that DC was struggling financially and under the scrutiny of a financial control board. The trees had been neglected for years and were in profound decline. In November 1999 the Washington Post had published an article by then staff writer Stephen Fehr on the state of DC’s trees. Fehr reported that the city’s tree canopy was decreasing at a meteoric rate. Alarming satellite images showed a 64 percent decline in the city’s heavy tree cover since 1973—a bitter irony given that Pierre L’Enfant’s original 18th-century design called for extensive green spaces, tree-lined boulevards, and a lush tree canopy. By the late 1990s, tree decline was starkly evident citywide—from unchecked development, environmental challenges, and Dutch elm disease, which had claimed most of the city’s 38,000 elms. Overall, an estimated 5,000 street trees a year were dying with few replacements, let alone a replanting plan, on the horizon. Betty Casey saw Fehr’s article and was immediately captivated by the idea of restoring DC’s trees. She had the funds but needed an organization with the talent, energy, and integrity to tackle the task.

How Serendipity and Vision Changed DC’s Urban Tree Canopy

by Barbara Shea, Founding President, Casey Trees, Green Spring Valley Garden Club, Zone VI

Casey Trees volunteers and staff (and a boatload of shovels and pickaxes) prepping for a busy day of tree planting at Langdon Park in northeast Washington, DC. All photos courtesy of Casey Trees
A meeting was arranged for the end of August 2000 at her suite at the Four Seasons in Georgetown. Over a five-course luncheon, several of us gathered to discuss the project Betty had in mind. She was prepared to donate a significant sum if the GCA would commit to the undertaking. We left lunch sated on honey lavender ice cream and with a check for $2 million that Bobbie pinned to her “bosom buddy” and took to New York by train. I was appointed chairman of the project, and Nan King, of The Trowel Club (Zone VI), was appointed vice chairman. We proposed an initial two-year feasibility phase during which the GCA would make a decision about committing to a larger project. The GCA Executive Committee agreed. A board of 13 club members from the DC area and GCA leadership were appointed, and Casey Trees was born.

Thus began a tumultuous year. The GCA had never taken money from a non-affiliated source, and the Executive Committee realized the size of the gift would dwarf their current endowment. Leadership had to think long and hard about accepting the gift and committing to a project of unlimited scope and duration. In the end the Executive Committee had the foresight and courage to take the leap of faith. An agreement was signed, and, true to Betty Casey’s word, additional funds were transferred to a new 501(c)(3): Casey Trees. We set about the task of incorporating, creating a mission and bylaws, hiring a small staff, and renting office space. We were indeed building the plane and flying it at the same time. Nan and I embarked on a kind of “listening tour” all over DC. We talked to city officials, other nonprofits, and scientists. Our standard speech went something like “Hi, we are from The Garden Club of America. We have money to reforest Washington, DC. What do you think we should do?”

As of December 2001 Casey Trees had a generous endowment, an executive director, and a board of 13 incredible GCA club members. We had to decide what to do first. We needed to hit the ground running and make ourselves known. Fehr’s Washington Post tree report in 1999 and subsequent talks with Betty Casey and others had given us a mandate to undertake an inventory of DC’s street trees. The city needed a tree management program and the political will to increase its urban forest budget at a time when it was struggling and in financial crisis. We needed visibility, engaged shareholders, and an army of volunteers. The inventory seemed like the answer, but how to go about it? Nothing like this had ever been attempted using volunteers—and on such a scale.
We decided to undertake a complete inventory of DC’s street trees using 38 college and graduate school interns and 300 trained volunteer “citizen foresters.” We had two-and-a-half months to inventory 106,000 trees and 32,000 empty spaces where trees had once stood. The inventory was a success: we gained both valuable information and citywide recognition. Casey Trees continued to add staff and develop new programs. The Citizen Forester program expanded and formed the core of Casey’s education department. We began planting trees on streets, in parks, and on private property. We also continued to perform inventories and conduct research and data gathering.

During January 2003 the leadership of the Casey Trees board and the GCA Executive Committee began discussions revolving around the relationship of the GCA and Casey Trees. The GCA determined that it would be in the best interests of both organizations if Casey Trees were able to operate with greater flexibility and include on its board experts in urban forestry and related fields, as well as distinguished members of the DC community. In early March 2003 resolutions were adopted to make the change to a supporting organization that operated “in connection with the GCA”—a different IRS designation. The baby had been birthed, nurtured, and guided to a promising future.

In July of 2008 Betty Casey gifted her 728-acre farm in Berryville, Virginia, to Casey Trees, along with an endowment. Bordered by two miles of the Shenandoah River, it is a magnificent property in the northern Shenandoah Valley at the top of the state. In March 2011 Casey Trees started its own tree nursery on the farm, allowing us to meet our internal planting needs while applying innovative growing and irrigating techniques. By this fall 30,000 trees will be in production, grown with little or no pesticides.

Today, a short 20 years after opening its doors, Casey Trees is one of the most respected and recognized local nonprofit organizations in the world dedicated to urban trees. It has grown from a staff of 10, located in a rented office space, to its own headquarters and tree planting offices in northeast DC, built in 2010, with a staff of 55. Just 60 miles west of the city, in Berryville, Betty Casey’s former farm enhances the organization’s mission through research, collaboration, and environmental stewardship. The farm grows tree species that are not readily available commercially.

Executive Director Mark Buscaino has a deep connection to Casey Trees: he served as a DC city forester in the early 2000s, and, afterward, as the national director of the US Forest Service’s Urban Forestry Program. Casey Trees has planted over 30,000 trees since 2004 and currently plants over 4,000 every year. And it engages over 6,000 volunteers each year in a wide-range of activities, including tree planting, tree care, inventories, conservation easements, and legislative advocacy.

For more information about Casey Trees visit caseytrees.org
Barbara Shea sat down with Mark Buscaino, the executive director of Casey Trees, to discuss his thoughts on the organization’s extraordinary journey.

You have been associated with Casey Trees from the beginning. What has been your most difficult challenge and satisfying reward?

I came from the public sector, where progress toward a goal was generally predictable but slow, and creativity was often discouraged. In the private, nonprofit sector, the pace is faster and the environment very creative—sometimes overly so. Both sides have their strengths and weaknesses. What surprises me is that while it is glaringly obvious that both sectors need a little of what the other has and need to work together, it is often impossible to make that marriage work. But when that does happen, there’s nothing that cannot be accomplished. Achieving that balance will remain Casey Trees’ most difficult challenge, and, when we get it right, most satisfying reward.

What makes Casey Trees unique among its peer organizations?

The endowment makes Casey Trees unique. We know we will be here in perpetuity. Trees live for over 100 years, so we have to create organizations that will be here to keep a watch over them, protect them. Casey Trees has the ability to experiment with programs and initiatives that, if they fail, we are not so weakened as an organization that we have to fear closing our doors. That flexibility is a double-edged sword, of course. We have embarked upon programs that we should likely not have embarked upon in the first place. But on balance we have succeeded more than we have failed, and this flexibility has helped dramatically advance our mission. Finally, we emphasize communication. Each year Casey holds over 100 training classes, planting, pruning, and tree care events throughout the city. We have a strong web presence and are able to reach 20,000 cooperators with a single keystroke. We have begun to advertise directly through our “Free Trees” campaign that runs on buses throughout the city. These communication mechanisms are luxuries our sister organizations can only hope to have. They help us connect people to trees, through trees and to Casey Trees.

What are your thoughts about the relationship between Casey Trees and the GCA, especially the Urban Forestry Scholarship?

The GCA/Casey Trees relationship has paid dividends from the very start. Casey Trees gained an immediate and large constituency of a venerable organization established over 100 years ago. From the GCA side, the Urban Forestry Scholarship, which Casey Trees has expanded over the years, is doing what both our organizations need for our continued long-term success—grooming young scholars and guiding them to be the urban forestry leaders of tomorrow. Casey Trees could not be more proud of our mutually beneficial relationship with the GCA.