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## Mom, really, I planted a tree with Sen. Clinton

Syracuse event launches tree-planting initiative, gives two boys a story to tell.

Sunday, May 23, 2004

**By Sara Errington**  
Staff writer

Bryan Puccia had a wild story to tell his mother Saturday when she called on a cell phone.

Puccia and his friend Marcos Montabo, both 14 and from East Syracuse, had just helped U.S. Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton plant a tree.

The pair were skateboarding downtown when Clinton and her entourage asked if they'd like to join them in Clinton Square for a tree-planting ceremony.

"What are you going to say? No?" Puccia said.

The ceremony to launch the Urban Forestry Initiative, which will plant more than 500 donated trees in Syracuse and four other Upstate cities, was one of several stops on Clinton's visit to the Syracuse area Saturday.

Mayor Matt Driscoll, who attended the ceremony, talked about the progress the city has made in replacing lost trees.

"Syracuse was one of the cities hardest hit in the Northeast, losing 95 percent of our elm trees to the Dutch elm disease in the 1970s, and after that the Labor Day storm of 1998 continued the blight of tree devastation in Syracuse and our surrounding communities," Driscoll said.

Clinton said she hopes the five cities in the initiative, which include Binghamton, Buffalo, Poughkeepsie and Rochester, can eventually increase their tree canopies to cover 40 percent of the cities' open space.

Syracuse has a canopy covering 26.7 percent of its open space.

Urban trees clear pollution, lower the cost of heating and cooling homes, and enhance property values, according to a state report released at the

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ceremony.

"And we know that over the long run, having these trees in the urban areas sends a signal that this is the kind of city that people want to live in," Clinton said.

About 100 people attended the ceremony, but it was concerns about their home, not trees, that drew Sophia Zerbinos and her daughter Caroline Tucker to Clinton Square to speak to the senator.

They carried a large sign asking for help in saving the Hotel Syracuse, where they've lived for the past year. The downtown hotel is scheduled to close Friday.

"I asked her if she could possibly look into the Hotel Syracuse," Zerbinos said. "She said she will do the best she can."

Clinton also spoke to school support staff at a conference at the Marx Hotel, and attended a Democratic campaign rally.

The conference audience applauded a speech that accused Republicans of giving tax breaks to the rich when the money is needed for education, health care, homeland security and equipment to adequately equip U.S. forces in Iraq.

"There is nothing more important to this current administration than protecting the tax cut of the top 1 percent," Clinton said.

Lynn Romanick, president of the Baldwinsville Educational Support Professionals union, said Clinton's comments about skimpy state funding for schools hit home.

Thirteen of the union local's 241 members, which include teachers aides, school nurses, bus drivers and other non-teaching staff, are scheduled to be laid off.

"Out of those 13 people, nine of them are single parents and they are the sole providers of their families," she said. "It's lack of federal funding, lack of state funding, lack of local funding. . . . It has a rippling-down effect."

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