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Thursday, May 27, 2004

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Posted on Mon, Apr. 26, 2004

The voice of the trees

By **MARK E. JONES**
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A NEW WEEK

EDITOR'S NOTE: We know Mondays can be gloomy. So how about a good story to start the week? If you have suggestions for "New Week" stories, call Allison Walzer at 829-7162 or e-mail her at allisonw@leader.net.

Vincent Cotrone spends his life around trees, so it seemed fitting to pose a silly but often stumping job interview question.

If you were a tree, what kind would you be?

"White oak," came the instant reply. "I'd be big, strong and live up to 300 years."

Hmmm ... evidently this Kingston resident has pondered all things arboreal, from the purely philosophical to practical matters: planting, pruning and promoting the establishment of trees throughout the region's cities and suburbs. In fact, Cotrone's fervor for his occupation runs so deep his wife practically insists the family schedule its vacations at the beach - someplace far removed from trees.

The urban forester's devotion, however, has led to changes not only in local landscapes but also in decision-makers' attitudes about planning and "green space." As of this week, it also has led to public recognition.

Cotrone, 38, is the recipient of the North Branch Land Trust's second annual Stewardship Award. The land preservation group will honor him at its banquet Thursday night in Wilkes-Barre.

"He's just a gem of a guy," says Linda Thoma, the land trust's executive director. "He is forever out there talking, teaching and showing people of all ages about our natural resources and why they're so important."

'Vinnie the Volunteer'

A modern-day Johnny Appleseed, Cotrone sprinkles seeds (or, at the very least, notions about trees) in each community through which he passes. Officially, as an employee of Penn State University's Cooperative Extension, he serves Luzerne and 17 other counties. Within that area, he advises about 100 shade tree commissions.

But he often strays farther, logging about 2,000 miles a month as he darts from his West Pittston office to points south (Philadelphia and beyond) and west (State College).

Lori Cotrone refers to her husband as "Vinnie the Volunteer" because of his propensity to say yes to

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any botanical-based community project.

He's currently helping to plant 145 trees along Kingston's streets. Meanwhile, Wilkes-Barre officials have tapped into his expertise for the planned replacement of some dying cherry trees on Public Square. And, in Tunkhannock, he has met with engineers to assist in the redesign of downtown sidewalks. (Wait, there's more.)

He also presides over Wilkes-Barre's Riverfront Parks Committee. That means he was busy last week providing school children with Earth Day-related lessons. And, yes, he's looking forward to this Friday, not only because it concludes an extremely hectic month, but because it is - as he wants everyone to know - National Arbor Day.

Not exactly what you'd expect from a guy who grew up in Harlem.

Tracing his roots

Cotrone credits a cousin for involving him in Boy Scouts, which, in turn, propelled him into the woods.

He frequented Central and Riverside parks. As a teenager, he spent a good part of each summer hitchhiking or otherwise finding a way off Manhattan Island. "I was drawn to nature."

By the eleventh grade, he had essentially chosen his career path. He attended the State University of New York in Syracuse, majoring in environmental science and forestry.

Before graduating, Cotrone took a summer job with a landscaping firm that had a tree-planting contract with New York City. (We're confident that somewhere out there, because of Vinnie Cotrone, a tree grows in Brooklyn.) Moreover, the stint allowed him to see that forestry wasn't an occupation relegated to rural parts of Minnesota. He could work in populated places too.

Since 1991, Cotrone has been affiliated with Penn State. He fields phone calls from schools, landscapers and community leaders, often handling subjects as intricate as the "hemlock woolly adelgid." (That's an insect fond of feasting on Pennsylvania's state tree, the hemlock.)

Mostly, though, he teaches.

He tells audiences that trees provide benefits far beyond maintaining air and water quality - although those are awfully important. Trees can boost a neighborhood's property values, even be a boon to an economically struggling downtown. "Shoppers will stay longer in shopping districts with trees versus areas with no trees," he says.

Likewise, research indicates tree-studded settings evoke positive social outcomes, he says. For example, in a study of Chicago Public Housing units, the residents of tree-shaded complexes reported fewer domestic violence and other police calls than their counterparts in all-concrete complexes. That's probably because people in the shaded settings were more prone to go outside, socialize and develop beneficial relationships.

Of course, Cotrone realizes that not everyone shares in his fondness for forested areas. He might look at a mature maple in full autumn glory and say, "Ahh, beautiful."

"Someone else," he says, "might look at it and say, 'Ugh, I gotta rake the leaves soon.'"

A budding protege?

Proving the acorn doesn't fall far, Cotrone's 3-year-old son, Michael, already has exhibited a tree fancy. The youngster has dirtied his hands at several plantings, including an annual event in Eagles Mere.

No question, Cotrone admits, his vocation often veers into family life and plans.

While traveling, for instance, he might suddenly stop to photograph a particularly splendid tree specimen or spot a poor pruning job and blurt out, "Oh, look at that!"

Lori Cotrone, 34, recalls that, in searching for a home to purchase about five years ago, her husband's criterion was that it had to have a large tree in front of it. (It does: a pin oak.)

And then there was the instance of the couple's honeymoon to Bermuda about nine years ago. Not content to merely lie on the beach, Vinnie sought other means of entertainment.

"He bought a book," she says, "on the trees of Bermuda."

TIMES LEADER STAFF PHOTO/PETE G. WILCOX

Vincent Cotrone, an urban forester, will be honored later this week for his dedication to improving the region's landscapes and teaching people about the far-reaching benefits of trees. He recently planted a birch near the boat launch in Wilkes-Barre's Nesbitt Park.

NORTH BRANCH LAND TRUST BANQUET

When: 5:30 p.m., Thursday

Where: Genetti Hotel & Convention Center, 77 E. Market St., Wilkes-Barre

Tickets: \$35 per person, required in advance. Call 696-5545 or visit www.nblt.org on the Internet.

Noteworthy: Featured speaker will be Michael DiBerardinis, secretary of Pennsylvania's Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. Activities begin with a cocktail hour and silent auction. Proceeds benefit the land trust, which is celebrating its 10th anniversary.



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