

Harrisburg Young Professionals Are Making A Difference

By Hiliary E. Bower, Harrisburg Young Professionals

In the early 1900s, Forster Street in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania was a bustling residential street lined with wide sidewalks, trees, and brick rowhomes. Then, in the 1970s, many city-dwellers abandoned the city for life in the suburbs, as was happening in many cities throughout the country. As Pennsylvania's capital city grew with commuters who came to work in the city and hustled back to the suburbs each evening, Forster Street was widened and the sidewalks diminished to handle the increased commuter traffic. The loss of tax money by people leaving the city, widening of streets, along with other factors, left many areas vacant and blighted. Now, many years later, a city-wide revitalization is taking place that includes Harrisburg's once nearly deserted Forster Street corridor.

In the spring of 1998 a new, vibrant group was formed called the Harrisburg Young Professionals (HYP). This grass-roots organization of active, civic-minded 20- and 30-year olds is committed to "making Harrisburg a better place to live, work, and play" by improving the socio-economic conditions as well as the aesthetic appeal of the city. HYP has a clear vision of an improved Harrisburg. Which includes making Harrisburg a destination for visitors wishing to experience fine dining establishments, nightlife, theatre, and the new Civil War Museum. HYP's vision also includes convinc-



Volunteers from Harrisburg Young Professionals turn concrete into beauty.

ing area residents of the value of home ownership within the City. A few members formed a committee to concentrate on beautification efforts within the city of Harrisburg, and chose the Forster Street corridor, a divider between the downtown business district and the midtown residential area, as their first project.

A plan was coordinated to replace the concrete median on Forster Street between Second and Green Streets with trees and shrubs. It was a very ambitious plan because conception to completion was only four months. HYP needed to procure approval from city and state government officials, recruit volun-

teers, and raise almost \$3,000.

Despite some initial resistance about the idea ever coming to fruition, HYP persevered. Incidentally, the median strip that was dug up to be replaced with plant life had been painted green, apparently in disguise to appear as grass. We found it both ironic and appalling. If this event was successful, it would bring credibility to our organization and would make similar future projects more likely. On that beautiful fall day in 1998, a shipment of 12 karpic red karpic maple trees and several dozen juniper and barberry shrubs arrived on time with 40 volunteers waiting eager to begin work.

The entire day was a huge suc-

cess and the delegation of enthusiastic amateur landscapers had the job completed by early afternoon. A neighborhood couple stopped by to ask who we were and to thank us for our efforts; they returned later with a donation of several hundred tulip bulbs. In 1998, Mayor Stephen R. Reed, who shares HYP's mission, said that, "The City of Harrisburg is planning a significant program that will address all the major gateways of the city with attractive signage and landscaping. We believe the faster street entrance was given new life through visual enhancement for many generations to enjoy."

Since this initial project, the remaining five blocks of Forster Street have been completed, with red maple and cherry trees, as well as shrubbery. The final area will be completed in October 2000 on 7th Street from Forster to State Street. It has made a dramatic improvement to this urban landscape on the border of the capitol complex. We anticipate locating another area of the city for future projects, beginning in the spring of 2001 and perhaps partnering with other organizations to share financial resources.

HYP has raised over \$23,000 through fundraisers, grants, and private donations to fund our efforts. Today 69 red maple and cherry flowering trees and 500 shrubs have been planted. It could not have been possible without the support and cooperation of city and state government, the City of Harrisburg's Parks & Recreation Department and the Pennsylvania Departments of Transportation, General Services, and Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, who don't always get the credit they deserve. Their assistance was instrumental in contributing expertise, labor, and equipment while HYP provided the bulk of the labor on the day of the events. It is a real tribute to the responsiveness of the public officials who are working for the citizens of this city. This project is certainly a good example of how organizations can work together,



After: Newly planted red maples on Forster Street.

er, particularly in a public/private partnership, to achieve a common goal, while setting aside individual egos.

Planting trees and other landscaping is one way HYP has chosen to make a difference in our community. Having foliage in urban areas not only enhances the beauty of the area, but also benefits the environment. But more important than the recognition we received in the local media, was simply knowing we had made a difference through determination and hard work. We had turned a green-painted, once-barren median strip into one that was alive with foliage. J. Alex Hartzler, past president of HYP commented, "The Harrisburg tree-planting project is just one of the efforts HYP has undertaken to revitalize our state capital. HYP is proud to play a leadership role in the ongoing effort to attract and keep people in our city." For additional information on Harrisburg Young Professionals, visit their website at HYPERLINK "<http://www.hyp.org>"



Before: Forster Street, between Second and Green Streets, 1998.