

# Planting Trees for the Millennium

By Tony Nash, Director of Community Affairs and Special Projects, Fairmount Park, Philadelphia

I wish I could say that the idea came to me in a flash of lightening but actually it came fairly easily. "In the year 2000, why don't we plant 2000 trees? — Of course! What a brilliant idea," said I to myself. And so began the saga. Next thing I became aware of was that Philadelphia's Mayor's office was calling for ideas to help celebrate the end of the Millennium. There was to be a great "gnashing of teeth, shaking of tambourines, and general merry making to send off the year of 1999 and welcome in 2000. One telephone call put me in touch with the "Philadelphia Millennium 2000" office, headed up by Amy Needle, a bubbly red headed young lady, formerly associated with the Visitor and Convention Bureau.

I must preface this article by stating that the whole tree planting idea would not have been possible were it not for my working relationship with Julianne Schieffer, a community forester who works diligently for the Penn State Cooperative Extension in Montgomery County. Julianne also works with the Pennsylvania Urban and Community Forestry Council and is one of Pennsylvania's most ardent advocates for the role that community trees and landscapes must play in the state's future. When I was speaking to her about my idea, she immediately offered to donate a cache of trees that were donated each year from a large closely aligned corporation. I could have half the trees in the fall and other half in the spring, thus bringing me up to that magical number of 2000.

When I first visited Amy's office, the most clearly defined thing there was the silver and blue sign that hung over the door on the



*Mayor Rendell (right) and Tony Nash worked hard to make the tree planting a success.*

first floor of City Hall. Somehow, the sign looked out of place in the rather staid beige hallway but on the other hand, it also looked so "New Years Eve-ish." It was evocative of bells and whistles and confetti; you could almost feel it. Upon walking into the office though, there were newly carpeted offices, boxes, and lots of telephones partially connected, or lying around waited to be placed on desks that had not arrived yet. I found myself a bit envious of this young lady, getting ready to head up one of the most exciting events that Philadelphia has embarked upon.

Because I work for the Fairmount Park Commission, it did not take long to convince Amy that planting trees was a natural way for us to play our part in this orchestrated symphony to the new millennium. We sat in the deceptively quiet office and spoke of trees and families and how our program would become part of a twenty-four hour

whirlwind of activities and, even then, I could feel the tingle of excitement. This was going to be "really big" as TV's master showman Ed Sullivan used to say, and Fairmount Park was going to be part of it. Great! This "Countdown to the Millennium" was also to be the last big bash for former Mayor Edward Rendell. One event for every hour leading up to the year 2000.

One of the best things about being involved with the "Countdown" was watching the millennium office come together. The next time I returned to the offices it was occupied and there were voices coming from all the many cubicles and offices that had been carved out of the space. There was a big conference table and there we were, all sitting around reporting upon our various ventures and being referred to as the "producers."

We settled into a routine of bi-weekly meetings where we sat around the table and reported on our various events, as varied as the city is wide. From running up the steps of the Art Museum a la "Rocky," to marrying 2000 people, to reading poetry in a museum, to marching across the city to well...planting trees in Fairmount Park. At one point there were so many folks around the table, it spilled into the next room and almost into the hallway. Now there was a producer for the "Countdown," Ira Rosen, whose job it was to see that everything flowed smoothly.

Next there were a series of press conferences, which featured the Mayor playing up the various events that would be taking place. On hand was a young Rocky to greet us as we arrived in the appro-



*Joe Frazier championed the tree planting effort.*

priate voice, complete with a black eye. Each event had its turn to be featured and when our turn came, I enlisted a friend, Joe Frazier, former Heavyweight Champion Of The World and native Philadelphian. At one point, Mayor Rendell was so happy to see Frazier, he forgot he was there to champion the tree planting, and started challenging him to run up the steps of the Art Museum. I had to jump up and thrust one of our trees between them to remind him that Joe was there for the Plant A Tree Program.

At the second press conference, which took place at the Academy of Natural Science, both Marvis and Joe Frazier came. I arrived complete with a bag of soil, gloves, a trowel, and lots of young trees. One of the problems with planting trees in the winter is that they usually don't have any leaves on them except for the evergreens. We were very fortunate in that the trees we received included some oaks that hold onto their leaves. Even so, when the Millennium folks saw the whips with their brown leaves, they were disappointed. "Where are the trees?" "How come they're not green?" I had to explain in my park expert type voice that it was winter and believe it or not, we were actually lucky to even get some with leaves.

As the press conference proceeded, we were successful in getting the Mayor to help plant a tree

in a pot with Joe Frazier, and then to discuss some of the other events that would be taking place. In the meantime, Joe stood there holding the tree, looking around to see if someone will rescue him by taking the pot back. But, it looked so wonderful, having the former Heavyweight Champion Of The World standing there center stage, that I left him there, holding the proverbial pot for the duration of the conference. We rightly figured that if anyone were in good enough shape to hold a community tree, it would be our champion boxer. One of the reasons I chose Joe Frazier is that I wanted to get the message out to the men and fathers of this city that you can be very "macho" and still love trees. Too often, men feel that they can't stop to smell the roses without challenging their identity and masculinity. Because he is a heavyweight boxing champion, a father and grandfather, as well as a coach and mentor for other young men, Joe is in the unique position of being able to transcend all these stereotypes. His humor makes him that much more delightful to work with. Good sport that he is, Joe stood there for the entire conference, holding up our little tree.

As the weeks went by and plans came together, we "producers" began to meet more frequently and were able to watch the office fill up with all sorts of incredible boxes

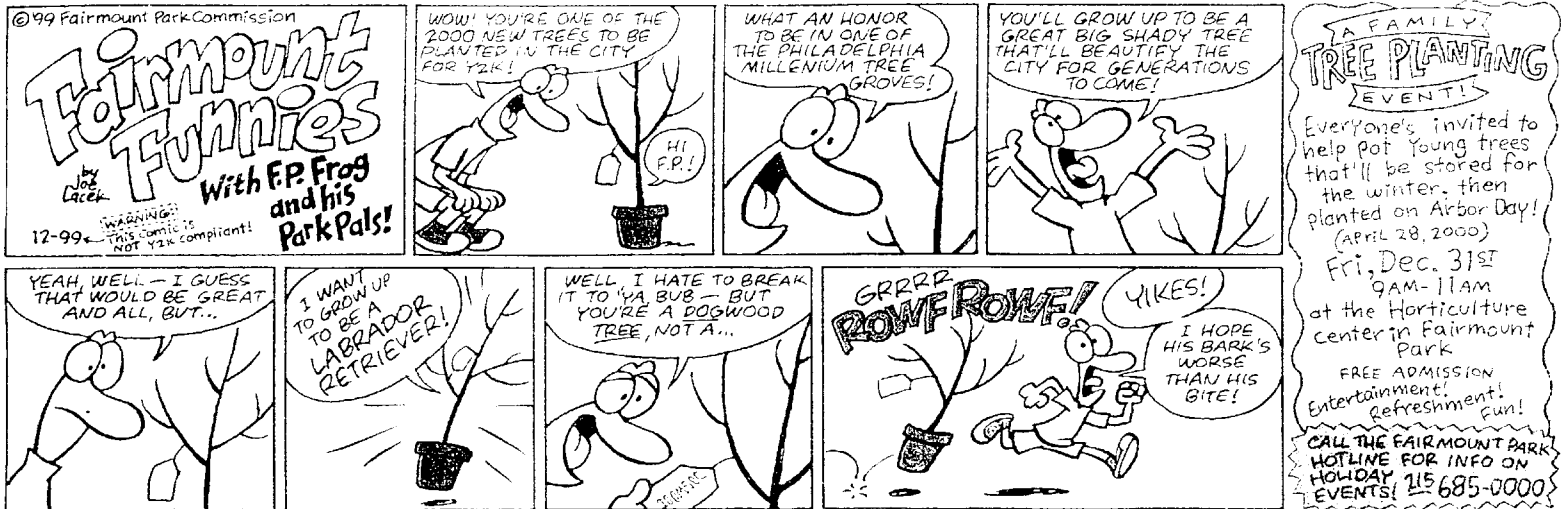
and bags. Suddenly confetti was everywhere, on the tables, on the floor, scattered on desks. Silver and blue balloons were peeking out of bags and all sorts of silvery items began to appear.

Meanwhile, our tree project was looking great. Despite a last minute glitch in the delivery of the trees, through the good graces of Norm Lacasse of the Pennsylvania Urban and Community Forestry Council, our trees were comfortably stored in the refrigerated boxes at the Horticultural Center. Was there ever a more satisfying feeling than opening the door and seeing your boxes of trees safely hidden away, waiting for their day in the sun? I would wander over every now and then, just to take a peek at them.

Working with Bill Mifflin, Executive Director of the Fairmount Park Commission, we designed a tree planting program to befit such a momentous occasion as the end of a millennium. Because of the time of year, planting outside was impossible so we decided that everyone would place their trees in pots and label them. We would then properly store the trees and plant them in other celebrations when the weather became warm.

Having heard the musical group Pennsylvania Postal Workers perform at the John Bartram Arboretum earlier that year, I enlisted them to come be part of our tree planting and they did themselves proud. I requested that they perform "Trees" by Joyce Kilmer, which they did. My only regret is that I was so busy coordinating all the families as they rushed forward to begin potting their trees, that I never heard them sing my request. I know they did a lovely job and it would have evoked memories of my camp days when I first fell in love with trees thanks to the dedication of a wonderful counselor intent on sharing that love with a bunch of city kids.

The Horticultural Center in Fairmount Park is probably one of the loveliest spaces to be found in Philadelphia. It is managed by Craw-



ford Clark, who, in turn, is supported by a dedicated staff, all of whom take great pride in their jobs and their environment. When the press arrived, which they did very early, they found the room had been set up in a manner that provided a perfect flow for the families who participated. Not only were the trees laid out around a huge tarp, loaded with soil, but also the various piles were labeled so folks could see what type of trees they were planting. It was amazing, the interest they took in identifying their trees. As the families began to flow in, the Postal Employees Choir treated them to several musical selections. Members of the Millennium Committee arrived to oversee the event and greet the Mayor. Among the guests of honor were the Police Commissioner John Timoney, several of the Park Commissioners, members of the Philadelphia Historic Sites Council, Marvis and Joe Frazier, Senator Vincent Hughes, and Philadelphia Inquirer Robb Armstrong who designed a special cartoon for the day and presented it to me.

When the Mayor arrived, the program jumped into action. We knew that he had many more miles to go so we had to be ready to follow through immediately. Each event had their 15 minutes of opportunity for television coverage, introduce the Executive Director, who introduces the Mayor who says,

“Happy to be here, let’s plant some trees!” and off we ran to do just that. I must say that the families and children were just thrilled to be there, planting their trees with the Mayor and Joe Frazier who was right beside him. Along with the Director, Commissioners Ballard and Timoney, Senator Hughes and Fairmount Park’s mascot F.P. Frog, all did a good job of potting their trees.

It was extremely gratifying to see so many people gathering up soil and carefully planting “their” trees. The Center staff were kept busy running back and forth with wheelbarrows of soil. Although I had provided gloves for everyone, after the first few minutes, almost everyone discarded the gloves and got their hands right into it, as if it was important for them to actually feel the soil and the roots. Cartoonist Robb Armstrong, the creator of the strip “Jumpstreet,” was kept busy drawing his characters on balloons as a real live replica of “Marcy” distributed copies of the cartoon created by Joe Lacey about the tree planting. Marcy also gave out crayons for the youngsters to color the cartoons. There were additional coloring books provided by Fire Commissioner Hairston and cookies and beverages provided by McDonalds Inc. I do believe some of those families would still be there if we had allowed them. As it was, the enthusiasm was endless.

After the Mayor left, rushing on

to his next event, everyone really got into the festive mood. People seemed to feel that this was the best way they could think of celebrating the new millennium and promised to come back in the spring to replant their trees in the park or at their schools or homes. Arbor Day will be our next stop, when we will invite all the planters to return and retrieve their trees. Then they will have the option of planting them in Fairmount Park, as part of the reforesting program, or taking them home to plant in their yards, at their schools, or in their local parks. In addition, Fairmount Park will be planting their own “Millennium Grove,” along with several schools from all over the city who plan to adopt their groves and become “Tree Tenders,” with guidance from the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society and the Natural Land Restoration Environmental Educational Program. Part of the “Millennium Plant a Tree” program will take place on Arbor Day and will continue throughout the year, ending on December 31, 2000. Plans call for several “Millennium Groves and sites to be established throughout the city in conjunction with schools, corporations, and organizations. For further information regarding participation in this program contact: Toni Nash, Director of Community Affairs & Special Projects at Fairmount Park: 215-685-0090, fax 215-878-9577.