

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

TreePeople

Andy Lipkis, L.A.'s Johnny Appleseed, has a remarkable knack for getting trees planted, and an equal gift for using trees to build social capital.

Don't bet against Andy. In 1973, while at summer camp in the San Bernardino Mountains, fifteen-year-old Andy learned that 40,000 trees died annually from L.A.'s air pollution. Andy mobilized his fellow campers to tear up an old parking lot and plant needed trees. He discovered that the California Division of Forestry had surplus tree seedlings, which it intended to destroy rather than donate to him. Several businesses refused his pleas to help buy the seedlings until the L.A. Times' article "Andy and the Bureaucratic Deadwood" ran. In three weeks, his project had 8,000 smog-resistant seedlings and nearly \$10,000 in private donations, much of it arriving in quarters and dollar bills from young Californians. TreePeople, first named the California Conservation Project, was born.

Lipkis converted an abandoned fire station on Mulholland Drive into TreePeople headquarters in 1976 and by the following year they'd planted 50,000 trees, in newly created Coldwater Canyon Park.

His motto is "think big, think natural." In 1981, Lipkis said that TreePeople could organize citizens to plant 1,000,000 trees by the 1984 Olympics at no cost to the city, when the city was debating taking 20 years and \$200 million to achieve the same goal. Four days before the Olympic flame arrived, the one-millionth tree, an apricot, was planted in Canoga Park.

Andy and his wife Kate have helped develop an urban forestry course that teaches city-dwellers not only how to select and plant trees, but that also catalyzes these neighbors into developing social networks as they care for these trees afterward.

His diagnosis of L.A. is true of many metropolises: "too much concrete, too much wasted water, too few trees." Thus, he has recently set about the even more ambitious task of turning all of Los Angeles into an urban watershed, where residents become stewards of an interlocking plan to preserve rain water, prevent flooding, and cool the region through trees. These efforts obviate the need to spend far more on power plants, storm runoffs, and water pipelines. His group has refurbished a house in South Central L.A., thereby demonstrating how underground cisterns, gradual runoffs, broad depressions (swales), mulch, and grading can help properties preserve valuable rain. He has mapped all of L.A. with a plan that incorporates the geography of each resident's home into this interlocking plan to save themselves and the city both rainwater and money.

He launched a Cool Schools initiative that diverted \$220 million in government funds planned to pave 400 school playgrounds. Lipkis proposed tree planting, where added landscaping and tree maintenance costs were offset by linked school air conditioning savings. Lipkis says, "Mimic natural cycles. Look where your system is leaking, where the government is hemorrhaging money to fight against nature. There's almost always answers there." Through Cool Schools, low-income, at-risk youth plant trees on school campuses and are trained in forestry. The students at these schools not only get beautified campuses, but learn about trees in classes and in teams provide ongoing care for them. The trees are strategically planted to absorb flood runoff, thereby making these areas intentional flood basins for a few days annually.

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