Restoring and Growing the Twin Cities' Community Forests in Times of Change

An interview with Karen Zumach, Tree Trust, St. Louis Park, Minnesota

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Lindsay Campbell (LC): To get us started, could you tell us your current position, your title, how long you've worked at Tree Trust, and what your role entails?

Karen Zumach (KZ): I am the Director of Community Forestry and I have been the director since May 2016. I've been working at Tree Trust for a few months shy of 10 years, which is outrageous! My job basically includes running the community forestry program here at Tree Trust. I like to say: "I put trees in the hands of people." Whether that's in a park or in their front yard—my work is to facilitate tree plantings for communities. We also manage tree distributions for planting on private property for various municipalities. We do educational outreach and engagement with elementary school students. And we plant anywhere upwards of 3,000 trees every year with volunteers at community parks, schools, and neighborhoods throughout the Twin Cities, Minnesota.

Erika Svendsen (ES): You mentioned that it's outrageous that you've been with Tree Trust for almost 10 years, why is that? Is it just the length of time or maybe you didn't think you were going to do this kind of work?

KZ: All of the above actually. I moved to Minnesota from the east coast about 10 years ago, originally intending and hoping to work on green roofs. But I moved out here around the same time as the housing bubble burst and the deluge of green roofs that were going in here in the Twin Cities pretty much dried up—it just stopped—so it was really difficult for me to find employment doing that. But this job had come up at Tree Trust, and while I appreciated trees, I never really had much of a driving desire to go work in arboriculture and just thought, "oh well I'll just do this job for a year, it's an educational and outreach position, no big deal." And then I found myself just completely enamored with the whole process of planting trees and what that does for communities, and the social aspects of trees just pulled me right in—very similarly to the way that green roofs did, but on a far more accessible level. So, it's outrageous because I never would have thought I'd be here for 10 years and really settling into what I could consider my "forever career". It has transformed my personal path and my career in ways I never anticipated.

LC: Thinking over those 10 years, can you reflect a little bit about the work you've done with Tree Trust, both in terms of environmental stewardship, but also community development—or the "social aspects" as you mentioned? What do you think has changed over those 10 years?

KZ: For me, because I've become more involved in the inner workings of urban and community forestry throughout the state, I've come to recognize how political trees are. I never thought that would be a sentence that one would utter, because: they're trees—how could they be political? But they really are; it's a surprising thing to navigate.

For example, when I'm doing work to try to get trees into under-canopied areas of the city of Minneapolis, it has been perceived as unfair by those who are in these higher canopied areas of the city. It's just shocking to me that this is the kind of reaction that you would get from some people. I think as I've become more involved in the work and really being deliberate in my actions of doing outreach to those areas of the city that are well-canopied, trying to navigate interactions with those who deem our actions as unfair, it has been something that's been interesting for me to have gone through. I'm able to navigate things now in a much more eloquent and effective way that I probably wasn't doing before when I didn't really have the kind of exposure to working in urban forestry. I think there's a really interesting perception that some people have about nature in general—they think everyone has access to the same benefits. But that's really not true, and I've come to see that over the past 10 years.

ES: Are the under-canopied areas also low-income areas and are the higher canopied areas also higher income areas?

KZ: Yes, I mean that really plays out all over the country, right? The Twin Cities is no exception to that trend. It's pretty obvious and it's not only that there's low canopy [in low income areas], but these areas also have the greatest potential [to increase canopy]. So that includes not just those obvious areas where you would expect to see trees, but there are places like front yards and backyards where there just aren't trees like there are in other parts of the city. It's really great to be able to have conversations with people and help them understand that not everyone has the same kind of access; and when explaining that inequality and having people come around to it, saying, "oh yeah you're right, you're right, that's a really good thing you should be doing then, that's fine way to go, we've got plenty of trees here." So those are the kinds of little victories across the 10 years that I've been doing this work that I feel really grateful for, because it's not just planting a tree, it's really changing the way people think about trees and how this all plays in a greater role of our community.

LC: Can you talk a little more about how you decide where to plant trees?

KZ: Our decisions go where our contracts are, especially for the private tree distribution programs. So, for example, the city of Minneapolis does an annual tree sale for its residents where they offer low cost trees to residents to plant on private property as a way of increasing the canopy without increasing the cost of tree maintenance for the city. We've been administering that program for about 12 years now, about 1,500 trees per year.

In the past couple of years, drawing on survey data and canopy studies, we've started some conversations and the city of Minneapolis realized that there's areas of the city that are under-canopied and lower income, with lower rates of participation in this tree sale program. So this combination of those three things has driven this shift to trying to remove as many barriers to participation as possible in those areas. This results in us focusing on particular areas of the city. I think there are some decisionmakers who get it, but don't think it's necessarily fair that the city-funded program is now targeting a particular area as opposed to making it accessible to all. This is despite the trend that higher canopy, higher income areas gobbling up 25 or 30 percent of the available trees year after year. So, there has been some pushback with that.

We instituted a presale for those lower canopy, lower participating areas of the city so residents were able to order their tree first. Then the rest of the interested city residents had to enter a lottery and be selected to get their tree. That kind of distributed things around the city a little bit more evenly, not a whole lot because there was still a very high percentage of participants coming from higher canopy, higher income areas of the city which just cracks me up because: it's a $25 tree and people are living in very expensive homes and could afford a full price tree! It's such an interesting thing to observe about people, how they value things and feel entitled to things and it doesn't change much year after year either, it's the same kind of conversations, and the same people calling and saying "how is this possible that this part of the city is, is being targeted?" And then when you explain it to them, they say, "well that's where all the money's going, all the money's going to that part of the city to fix it." But it's because there's limited resources and these are quality of life issues and we think about it like "we all do better when we all do better".

LC: We understand that in north Minneapolis you are doing greening and tree planting work in the context of different types of disturbances: invasive pests, slower-moving economic decline or disinvestment, and a fast-moving tornado. Across all of these possible disturbances are there differences or similarities in terms of your tactics for re-greening? Or is it more that each of these disturbances is just another moment where you can think

through messaging and strategies for putting trees in the hands of people? Can you reflect a little bit about working in the context of disturbance?

KZ: Our narrative for everything that we're doing right now, for the majority of the cities we work in, is about that slow-moving disturbance. It is talking about the emerald ash borer (EAB) and the fact that we are going to lose so many trees in such a short period of time. It is kind of taking advantage of that disaster in such a way that makes people more aware of the importance of trees. I use the term 'advantage' very loosely of course, but people are really starting to notice these large trees coming down in large quantities. It is the kind of thing that gets people's attention and really gets people talking about those trees in their community. So, disturbance is for sure part of our conversation when we're engaging in outreach and education and connecting with the people in north Minneapolis and beyond.

Its six years later and we're still talking about the [2011] tornado and helping the communities in those areas of the city replace the trees. Twenty years from now we're going to need those trees. They've been hit with a double whammy in that part of the city: still not recovered from the tornado, and then that huge loss of 6,000 or 7,000 trees from the EAB. Twenty-five to 30-inch diameter trees coming down on the streets and boulevards being replaced with much smaller trees. Six years later, the canopy is smaller and now the summers are hotter. All of those things are starting to become part of the conversation. We're talking with new homeowners who are moving into these areas of the city and just can't believe they bought a house where there aren't any trees. They want to know how to get them. I think it is an opportunity for us to really elevate trees to a new level because people are really starting to recognize what it's like to live in a place without them.

At the same time, it is hard because we're fighting so many other things. It is a whole lot harder to grow a tree now than it was 30 years ago and I think it is going to be a transformation for the cities here in general. I don't think people are really ready to get their head around that yet so we provide them with that tree, but make sure they understand that this is part of a bigger picture. If you have a boulevard tree that has been planted, you know it's your job to water it too, and those trees aren't going to get big without you—we are trying to make this be kind of a village response.

LC: You said it's hard to grow trees now. Did you mean that this is the case because of the heat, or because of cost, or because of the trees' susceptibility to invasives, or all of the above?

KZ: It's kind of all of the above: dealing with these longer stretches without rain and these strange weather patterns. We have more straight-line winds and bigger thunderstorms. I think that's a trend that is undoubtedly going to continue. When we're talking about these larger areas of no trees, they're working against a lot of other forces like wind exposure. There's not the protection of the others that those trees had before. I think there's a lot of effort in getting trees in the ground, but all of us have a role to play in ensuring that these new trees survive and thrive by receiving ongoing maintenance and care.

LC: It sounds like the memory of the tornado is still really powerful in north Minneapolis for those who were there. You also mentioned newcomers coming in and saying 'what's going on with this bare landscape'? And they want to transform it. And then with the EAB and loss of the larger canopy trees; there are folks who've probably been in this place and maybe didn't even realize what they had until it was gone?

KZ: So, when I say that we have this really interesting opportunity to talk about trees in a different way, we also need to talk about tree management in a different way. The Minneapolis Park Board (they are responsible for the management of the city's urban forest) is cutting down every single one of their 40,000 boulevard ash trees. The decisionmakers at the Board have decided that pesticides are not an option and that removal and replacement is the most efficient way to manage this pest. Thankfully, the department is being pretty thoughtful about it. They try to remove no more than 20 percent of the trees on a particular block, but the city of Minneapolis was set up with an urban street tree design that was block-based so there are blocks of just ash trees and then there will be another block of just honey locusts. In the areas where they're infested, they have to take down all of the trees. Historically, Minneapolis was 96 percent planted elm before Dutch elm disease, if you can imagine that. They had to essentially restart after Dutch elm disease. They didn't replant with 96 percent ash, it was 20–30 percent which is pretty typical across the state, but it's still a large percentage.

LC: Stepping back from the weather events and invasive pests, what about the context of either economic disinvestment or reinvestment? You talked a little bit about newcomers, so I'm assuming that might go along with neighborhood transformation and different demographic shifts, but do you use a community forestry approach?

KZ: At this point it's voluntary, so we're not driving in the streets of north Minneapolis and saying 'oh 22 to 27 X, Y, Z Street could use a tree.' We have this free tree program, we do outreach to those neighborhood groups to let them know that their members can come to us.

LC: So you are really focused on the household or the residential landscape?

KZ: Right. The city-owned properties are a very complicated story here. City-owned properties are under the purview of the city, the boulevards and parks are under the purview of the park board, which is a separate taxing entity. So our only place of impact in Minneapolis per se is within those private properties.

I'm sure it happens everywhere but when you give somebody a free tree and you don't have any buy-in, you drive by a dead tree. We've constantly been trying to find that place, the appropriate level of buy-in that's going to ensure the success and vitality of these trees. It's been a struggle because we still haven't really found that perfect recipe of what it is going to take to be successful.

Trying to create that sustainability, what we call our Green Team Program has been a challenge that we've been working really hard at improving through using the volunteer networks that exist here in the cities of change. We have essentially a Master Gardener Program that's focused on tree care. They're pretty well known throughout the Cities and just they're a great corps of about 100 different volunteers that are available to help schools, to help cities do tree care, and it's been a great thing for us to try to enlist them to reach out and work with schools beyond our timeline.

We have a lot of them that are working year after year with us, which is really fantastic. They're kind of an extension of our very small community forestry program and really invaluable to us because we wouldn't be able to get half as much done without them so, it's important.

ES: Karen, with this group and others that you're planting trees with, could you say anything more about people's intentions and what motivates them?

KZ: We just surveyed this past cohort of [tree] recipients through the Minneapolis Tree Program to get a sense of why they were participating, and how the program went for them. The first question is: Why did you participate in this program? The overwhelming response (people were allowed to select more than one choice), was basically because they were losing trees in their

community, or they had lost a large tree on their own property previously. So I think there is that recognition when someone has a tree and loses a tree, that if there's a way for them to get another one that seems to be a pretty big driver for them to participate. Coming in a very close second to all of that was "I can't resist a deal." I had that as one of the answers. Like, I can't pass up a $25 tree that would typically cost me $150-200. So I imagine there is a little bit of both of those kinds of things pushing and pulling. At our community tree planting events, where we're planting in parks around the cities with volunteers, the overwhelming driver for them to come out is because they want to plant a tree for the next generation. We really do capitalize on the idea that we need these trees more than ever because we're going to be losing so many trees. Having those conversations and really inspiring to folks and thanking them for participating here today, but also making sure that they're going home and talking with their neighbors and making sure they know, for example, what an ash tree looks like and how they will need to be making a decision on what they want to do with their tree.

With every planting that I do, I really talk about the quantifiable environmental benefits that tree provides. I try to help people understand what that 20" diameter ash tree is doing for us—just standing there, and think about how many of them there are in our communities. When those numbers are put together, the magnitude of this issue really becomes evident. We hope this kind of information creates advocates at the same time. I don't know how effective we've been with that. At the end of this planting season we'll be resurveying volunteers to see what kind of behavior change we're seeing from that activity, because a lot of them have come back throughout the year. Our planting window is very small here in Minnesota. We have about a 6-week window in the spring and about 8 weeks in the fall and then, well, winter comes. We have to get a lot of work done in a pretty short period of time and a lot of that involves people coming back multiple times in multiple events. This year is the first year that we really were pretty aggressive in that education and advocacy piece, teaching that this is an important thing that you need to know about.

ES: Has anything unexpected come out of your volunteer stewardship programs and the potential loss of more trees?

KZ: We have this group of small business owners from Minneapolis, most of them are from south Minneapolis, they are landscape contractors and tree care companies and residential contractors and they're all working together to improve their city. They call themselves the Autonomous Collective. They are raising money through a fundraising campaign to their customers. So

their clients are working with them to help us plant trees in north Minneapolis. The Collective has been doing a really pointed campaign talking about trees, talking about the tornado, talking about EAB and also talking about a way for their clients to help a part of the city that is desperately in need of trees and the multitude of benefits they provide. So far, they have raised $20,000 for planting trees in north Minneapolis.

This project started with just two people, one was a former employee of Tree Trust. He was a youth employee when he was very young and now he owns his own landscape company. He wanted to figure out a way to help others and this is just something that he came to us about. We said, "We don't have funding for our north Minneapolis Program this year. Is that something maybe you guys might be interested in doing?" They just took this and ran with it. They and their staff are going to be coming along with us to private properties and planting these trees in the fall on a one-day event that they pretty much funded entirely through their clients and will be fueling this event with their employees and their staff. I think it's going to be really interesting to see how people's perceptions change after that activity because they have been so instrumental in raising the funding for it, and telling the story about it, and then implementing it. So that's an exciting one.

LC: They had their own company and then working together in this really novel way to bring in new resources.

KZ: It's amazing really. They've created a nonprofit because, as small business owners, they needed to get insurance for this event, and they were a little leery about going onto private property and protecting their assets. We were more than happy to offer whatever we could but they wanted an extra layer [of protection], so they wanted to become their own nonprofit and they wanted it to be the Autonomous Collective. But apparently there's somewhere in New York that has already taken the Autonomous Collective name so now they're now the Autonomous Collective of Minnesota (chuckle).

LC: Stepping back, you've already shared a lot of lessons, but can you reflect on some of your proudest moments or learning moments over these 10 years?

KZ: Yes. When the mayor of Minneapolis called us after the tornado and wanted us to be that "tree first responder" to what had happened, that for me was a really big deal. Mostly because I didn't totally understand what our role could be, and then to be called upon pretty quickly to get in there and figure out a way to get trees back in the ground [was significant]. To know the first thought

he had was to get in touch with us was, for me, a pretty proud moment. It was one of those things where you watch this happen on TV and you want to figure out what you can do to help. Then we were immediately tasked with helping. That was a really great opportunity for us to be able to respond in a way that didn't require a whole lot of trying to convince people to let us help. It was that we were asked to help first that was really great right off the bat for us. It really connected us to people that we had already had some sort of connection with through our youth group that had been working in north Minneapolis. That was a pretty exciting moment for me.

I've been doing a lot of advocacy work lately at the state level, trying to get funding for EAB. This has opened for me some new avenues of talking about trees and engaging with legislators, talking about environmental justice. These things are so inherently important to all of the goals that the state has regarding climate change and clean water, and I'm working to bring urban and community forestry to that conversation.

I think all the things along the way in my 10 years of working with people in planting trees and volunteering, working with volunteers, and working with elementary school kids. I feel like all of those things built me up to be in a place to help decisionmakers tie it altogether. I don't know that I would be able to speak as passionately about trees without having those experiences. Like having a first-grader tell me why trees are amazing, and hearing them say things like "well because they give us oxygen and because they clean the air." They're really excited about planting a tree for their school—watching that transformation happen. Or having a woman be just so grateful for getting a tree planted in her yard after she lost a tree in the tornado. I think recognizing those human connections has really made it a whole lot easier for me to talk to decisionmakers about trees' importance than if you ask me to do it in 2007 when I first moved to Minnesota.

ES: Do you ever think that what your organization is doing is not only good for the environment but also helps to strengthen our democracy—to make a better city?

KZ: No, but I certainly will now! You know it's funny you say that because we have the Super Bowl coming to town. So, they come in and they all start to do a pretty significant effort to be green. They have a greening initiative that comes with the Super Bowl and they partner with nonprofits. They are partnering with us to administer some urban forestry grants to cities across the state. They're not huge, but they are $4000 grants. Whatever they are, it is their urban forestry initiative, which is great. They had a kickoff, where they have a shovel-passing. A golden shovel that gets passed from the previous host community to the

new host community. It was passed from Houston to Minneapolis this spring. We ended up planting in a park in Minneapolis that was in the middle of an area of the city with a large Somali population. An area with a lot of public housing, and a rec center right next door where we requested if we could have some of the kids from the youth group there to come help plant trees with us and members from the Minnesota Vikings.

So, we're cleaning up after the NFL events, and it's me and two of my staff who are also women. A Somali woman and her very elderly mother came by and were telling us that her mother had just arrived here from Somalia. She was just standing there watching us and she couldn't believe that three women were doing this work. She wanted to help, so she ended up picking up shovels and handing them to us to help us clean-up. It was one of those moment where I realized that I would have never had this opportunity to connect with these two women from these vastly different areas if I hadn't been there planting trees that day. So, it ended up offering me this really great opportunity to connect with people that I hadn't previously. You never know. I think we just all have to be open, you know? It's all about how we connect with the opportunity. I think that's very important for us all to keep in mind.

LC: Just one last question: Can you reflect a little bit about your future goals and what's next on the horizon for Tree Trust?

KZ: I think it will be interesting to see what's next. I think we're kind of in that place right now of growing pains and we're kind of at capacity within our own framework for our staff. I have two people that work with me and we have, I think, 25 plantings happening this fall. It's really been: "what's our role going to be in this response to emerald ash borer?" For me, right now that is really what we're focused on, because we're talking about a couple of generations before we'll be able to restore that canopy to the pre-invasion levels.

A void to fill is being a private property supporter. Just talking about Minneapolis and their numbers, 40,000 trees on public property but then another 160,000 trees on private property; I think our role is going to be diving into helping residents and property owners come back from this, and taking advantage of this opportunity to make people understand trees in a different way before they're gone. I think these are the two big drivers aside from feeling really strong about wanting to build advocacy within our own networks. Also making sure that this conversation about trees and this loss of trees that we're going to have doesn't just become one of those things that's "Oh I remember the days of emerald ash borer"—just like they wax on about the days of Dutch elm disease. Not allowing it to fall out of the public

conversation and where the money goes, because I think that trees are going to play a really big role in how we survive in the next century.