

Tree Musketeers Says Goodbye After 30 Years of Growing Youth Leaders and Trees

Three decades after Tree Musketeers was founded by eight-year-olds to empower young people to be environmental leaders, it is shutting its doors as of April 30, 2017. The El Segundo-based nonprofit organization emerged as the world's first youth-led environmental organization and remains a place where "kids are boss." Young people have worked to plant over two million trees in California and around the planet and hosted multiple national events and campaigns to bring like-minded kids together. In the process of making communities healthier, Tree Musketeers provided leadership education and opportunities to thousands of young people, some from severely disadvantaged backgrounds, who grew up to become leaders in schools, business, politics and the arts.

Tree Musketeers' Board of Directors made the difficult decision to wind down operations after hosting its 30th Annual Arbor Day Celebration, a successful event where hundreds of volunteers came together to plant and care for trees. Tremendous enthusiasm remains for the organization's mission among volunteers, young and old, who serve as Youth Management Team, Adult Partner Team, Advisory Directors and Arbor Day task force members in addition to those who are just happy to tend trees. A number of factors led the Board to conclude that ongoing operations were not feasible.

The decision to bring the Tree Musketeers story to an end follows several years of financial hardship, which Executive Director Gail Church attributes to the changing economic climate and public spending priorities. "We saw a precipitous drop in individual and corporate giving during the 'Great Recession,' which has never fully rebounded. Federal and state grants to

nonprofit urban forestry programs had already dropped off in the early 2000s, so the shrinking individual and corporate gifts beginning in 2008-09 were particularly devastating to us." "It is sad to say goodbye," says Co-Founder

a sycamore they named Marcie the Marvelous Tree, which they hoped would inspire other kids to plant trees and help the environment. Tara Church remembers that day well, almost 30 years later: "We wanted to

plant a tree, which was easy and fun, because more trees in our communities can help all of those environmental concerns." They soon realized that one tree was not enough, and began dreaming of a plan to plant trees throughout their community and inspire other kids to join their cause in hometowns worldwide. Tara's mom, Gail, and other parents and friends were there from the beginning to help Tree Musketeers' young founders bring their dream of a youth-led environmental movement to reality.

Hometown successes range from surrounding the residential area of El Segundo with a green pollution barrier of trees to inspiring industries to replace the ozone-depleting CFCs, and bringing recycling to El Segundo. These accomplishments have merited recognition from three U.S. Presidents and numerous other prestigious awards, and they are why Tree Musketeers is profiled by leadership and business writers, and why the organization was one of 25 highly effective organizations highlighted in the Brookings Institution publication, *Sustaining Nonprofit Performance*.

Fernando Aguilar, the organization's 16-year-old president, shares his thoughts. "It has been an honor to serve as a Tree Supervisor, Youth Manager, and the President of Tree Musketeers," he said. "This organization has taught me more than just leading a bunch of people. It has taught me humility, strength, patience and organization. After working with all these people and wonderful youth, I can say in full confidence that I am hopeful for the future. Caring for this Earth is about looking at the past and turning around, stepping into a healthy future..."

- Content and Photos Provided by Tree Musketeers



Three Musketeers' founders plant Marcie the Marvelous Tree in 1987.

and Chair of the Board, Tara Church, "but the trees we have planted and the young people who became leaders through our work are a legacy that will live on."

Tree Musketeers was founded on May 9, 1987 when 13 Brownie Girl Scouts planted

do something small to help the Earth, which was suffering from massive deforestation, holes in the ozone layer, suffocating pollution in the air and oceans, animal extinction, and so many other things that were terrifying to our young minds," she said. "We decided



Youth managers and staff in front of Marcie the Marvelous Tree last year.



Adam Gerard, Youth Manager, 2007 interview with Jane Harman and Lawrence Bender at Clean Energy Expo. Photo courtesy of Lomita Harbor Connection.



Youth Leadership at Speech Class Graduation last year in the City Council Chambers.



President Talia Gerard accepts Volunteer Management Award from Arbor Day Foundation in 2016.