

# Chautauqua Oaks Project meets its goal

In 2016, watching the trees of their neighbourhood begin to disappear at an alarming rate, 2 Chautauquan neighbours discovered they had something in common; they both wanted to do something to preserve The Great Chautauqua Tree Canopy. An unfolding course of action involving 1000s of volunteer hours and buckets of acorns followed and, as of Wednesday October 4 2023, they accomplished what they hoped to do.

Their initial over-the-fence conversation led them to catalogue the tree canopy of Chautauqua. This Inventory process allowed them to identify the features that distinguish Chautauqua's urban forest from the rest of NOTL; the most impressive feature being the groves of epic-scale heritage oaks naturally scattered throughout the neighbourhood.

Having identified the distinctive qualities to protect led them to create the Chautauqua Community Tree Plan; a blueprint for the use of homeowners and the Town on how to retain iconic features.

Having also identified the threats to the canopy's longevity led them to create the Chautauqua Oaks Project; putting words into action with the goal to insure the canopy's future. The Inventory confirmed the most iconic feature was the 166 mature oaks. All of a similar age they had self seeded themselves on abandoned farmland just after 1812. However, with Chautauqua now a residential neighbourhood and self seeding a challenge, only 12 young oaks were found....not nearly enough to eventually take over for the 166. Clearly it was time to start planting oaks, lots and lots of oaks. 2018 marked the first planting. Over 80 trees were purchased and planted on Wilberforce and the Circle.

Searching for a more financially sustainable solution led to a partnership with Niagara College's School of Horticulture; the formation of a plan to harvest Chautauqua acorns to grow, and plant back into the neighbourhood. A true win win it provided a meaningful learning opportunity for the students while repopulating Chautauqua's canopy with the actual offspring of its beloved heritage oaks. An extraordinary, rare opportunity for any urban forest, 2022 saw the first crop of 'ChautauquaOaks' planted along Shakespeare.

To share information with their community about the Inventory, the Plan and the Project led them to create ChautauquaOaksProject.ca; relaying the story of how The Great Chautauqua Tree Canopy came to be, what makes it so distinct, and what anyone and everyone can do to protect it.

On October 4 2023 the Chautauqua Oaks Project completed planting on all the remaining streets of Chautauqua. There is now a total of 172 young oaks ready to assume the role of the 166 heritage oaks. They will be the *New Great Chautauqua Tree Canopy* ....ready for future generations to enjoy.

"Our work is now done." says Leslie Frankish, one of those Chautauquans "The restorative experience of Chautauqua's vaulted landscape is a treasure to live within. We are happy to have helped provide the next generation of oaks. In doing so it was also important to try replicate the unique formations of the existing oaks. When self seeding they had a tendency to plant themselves in twos and threes, remarkably close together. Defying modern 'landscaping rules' they evoke a sociable relationship...a charming indication that our neighbourhood is a friendly place. Also, the way the groves spread across many properties creates the sense of a unifying protective embrace ...a comforting indication of community guardianship. To be able to facilitate these connections made this endeavour all the more meaningful."

Wednesday also marked a second milestone for the Project: Having gifted ChautauquaOaks to other areas including Niagara Parks for Paradise Grove and Christopher's Grove in Old Town, the greater Niagara on the Lake tree canopy is now richer by over 500 trees.

“This turned out to to be a very satisfying retirement project” Holmes Hooke, the other Chautauquan, remarks with a broad smile.

Both Leslie and Holmes point out their dream would never have got off the ground without the exceedingly generous help provided by Betty Disero, JB Hopkins, Ruth Denyer, Mary Jane Clark and Shauna Dickson and the great support of Niagara College School of Horticulture, Town of NOTL Department of Public Works and, of course, members of the Chautauqua community who pitched in and participated, including the 93 homeowners who welcomed the future Great Chautauqua Tree Canopy into their gardens and yards.

It may not be so apparent now but over the next hundred years a forest will rise, similar to the one that exists today. Hopefully someone will do something similar in 100 years time.....

B. Mowat  
October 2023