

OVERTON PARK

notes

July 2024

Tina Sullivan announces departure

After twelve years at the helm of Overton Park Conservancy, Executive Director Tina Sullivan has announced her plan to transition out of the role once a successor has been brought on board.

Under Tina's leadership, Overton Park has been restored as the crown jewel of the Memphis park system, and has experienced a surge in popularity in recent years, counting 1.3 million visitors per year. In addition to critical improvements to park operations and maintenance, the Conservancy has executed multiple capital improvement projects, most recently including the \$4 million renovation of the Overton Park 9 Golf Course and Abe Goodman Golf Clubhouse, undertaken in partnership with the City of Memphis.

With a focus on conservation, Tina prioritized the 126-acre Old Forest State Natural Area as a key component of the Conservancy's mission. We've conducted research, removed invasive plants, renovated and maintained trails, installed welcoming entrances designed by local artists, and launched a robust schedule of nature-based programming, with many of these achievements coming about collaboratively through the active role of park volunteers and supporters.

"Having the task of connecting people to nature has been deeply rewarding," Tina says. "Something magical happens when people come to Overton Park and experience its unique beauty and welcoming



culture. People from different backgrounds form bonds around their love of this place. The park's diverse community is vibrant and thriving, and that strength is what will protect this place for future generations."

Throughout her tenure, Tina worked with the Memphis Zoo and the City of Memphis to develop alternatives to the three-

decade-long practice of parking cars on the park's Greensward. "Tina's patient leadership during that tenuous period kept everyone at the negotiating table until the best possible solution could be found," said board chair Yancy Villa. This negotiation resulted in a solution that will permanently end Greensward parking when work has been completed, and it will also bring additional acres of old-growth forest under the Conservancy's management. A portion of the City's maintenance area in the southeast corner of the park will also soon be added to our managed area.

"With the park thriving and the Conservancy in a steady-but-growing position, this is the opportune time to relinquish the captain's seat. We're in a moment of calm before the next growth phase, which gives the board some freedom to spend time recruiting the best possible leader," Tina says.

"Tina has been the right leader at the right time for Overton Park Conservancy. From its inception to today, she has led the Conservancy with integrity, tenacity, and passion. The board of directors is infinitely grateful for Tina's devotion to the park and our city," says Villa.

A forest full of friends

My favorite programs at Overton Park are anything that falls under the NatureZen banner. Our team lives in the reality that spending time in nature gives us a dopamine boost, deepens our connection to this place, and grounds us in the present moment.

And while I've said repeatedly that it's the *people* of Overton Park that make this place so magical, I have to give a deep bow of gratitude for the non-human creatures who add to the delight and wonder that each day here brings.

In no particular order, I'll beg your indulgence as I share some stories about the particular creatures who captured my heart, helped me overcome some of my fears, and reminded me that we are not just protecting this place for the humans.

A couple of regulars like to haunt the parking lot near the Rainbow Lake Playground. There's Narcissus, the tufted titmouse who can't stop gazing at his reflection in car mirrors. And then there's L'il F'r, the squirrel who vexed our janitorial contractor for years with his trashy antics.

There was the time that I received a call about a fox caught in a trap that had been set out to catch some stray dogs. I remember his cartoon-like eyes as he looked up at me timidly, then bolted off toward the forest after I shooed him out of the cage. I'm pretty sure that was the same fox who came bounding through the wildflowers just as I was giving a forest tour to someone who very much needed to understand the unique value of the wild nature experience that Memphians can get in Overton Park.

Nathan the Opossum (named after the park visitor who called to report a dead opossum in a trash can) confused me. To this day, I'm not sure if he was



You know him, you love him. Just not as much as he loves himself.

really dead. But after some coaxing, his partner did finally open its eyes and lumber on out of the trash can. What I learned from Nathan, or actually from my colleague who knows more about wildlife than I do, is that it's irresponsible to interact with wildlife like that unless you're trained and wearing protective gear. Don't do it. Luckily for me, Nathan didn't teach me this lesson the hard way.

And finally, the snakes. So many snakes. Remember the rat snake spotted during a 5K in the Old Forest whose photo went viral? It made me want to learn everything about rat snakes. The only rat snake I've actually interacted with was a tame one being shared with park visitors by our friends from Tennessee State Parks. And I became enamored with our copperhead population after learning so much about them from our Programs Manager, the local expert on this particular population. Those are best observed through a zoom lens. And while they should inspire caution, and a sturdy leash for your dog, I have learned that they don't deserve your hatred. They are a vital and beautiful part of the forest ecosystem, playing their part in a quiet way.

In the coming months, I'll be stepping down from the role of Executive Director and handing my wildlife guidebook to the next leader. I hope I never stop learning about the forest flora and fauna from the knowledgeable Conservancy team, and through my own observations and curiosity. I hope to see you on the trails, maybe trying to distinguish whether we're hearing the ethereal song of a wood thrush or a hermit thrush. And I very much hope that you, the *people* of Overton Park, continue to protect the park and the forest for many future generations of foxes, snakes, birds, opossums, and people.

tina's message



Tina Sullivan

Planting possibilities at Overton Park

Thanks to our incredible volunteers, we're creating wildlife habitat with two exciting planting projects.

Oaks vs. invasives

One of the biggest challenges facing any urban forested natural area is the impact of invasive plants. Overton Park's Old Forest is home to more than 350 plant species, nearly 100 of which are not native to our local ecosystem. Seeds from these plants are carried into the forest by wind, birds, and water from residential gardens, where they've been planted as ornamentals. These plants, which have few or no natural predators in our area, take resources from native plants like the majestic oak and tulip poplar trees that provide valuable habitat for wildlife and make the forest such a compelling place to visit.

The Conservancy has been combating invasives since our inception, led for the past seven years by dedicated volunteer Bill Bullock. Bill leads crews in removing plants that are particularly harmful or aggressive in the forest, like English ivy, Chinese privet, Chinese wisteria, and cherry laurel. Over the past couple of years, they've begun to supplement their efforts by planting oak seeds and bare-root trees.

Thanks to a grant from the Tennessee Department of Agriculture - Division of Forestry and the USDA Forest Service - Southern Region, we were able to get more than 70 bare-root oaks into the ground this winter. Unlike tulip poplars, whose seeds remain dormant in the soil for years, oak acorns are not viable in the long term. Seniors from Compass Community Schools first cleared areas of invasive plants, and then installed the oaks into the ground.

We'll continue to monitor the areas where the new oaks were planted, removing any invasives before they've had a chance to re-establish.



Compass School students and faculty plant oaks; volunteers from Evergreen Garden Club and Daughters of the American Revolution - River City Chapter plant the pollinator garden.

Playing host to pollinators

When the two crape myrtles in the raised beds at Veterans Plaza succumbed to frost last year, we saw an opportunity: use those beds to create habitat for beneficial pollinating insects and birds.



A monarch visits the lantana at Veterans Plaza.

With volunteers from Evergreen Garden Club and Daughters of the American Revolution - River City Chapter, we were able to repurpose these beds to include nectar plants (which provide food for adult insects) and host plants (where butterflies and moths lay eggs, which then feed on the leaves after hatching). Already home to thriving lantana flowers, which offer a reliable nectar source, these beds are now filled with plants that offer food for the caterpillars that grow into adult pollinators.

Among the plants we installed are parsley and fennel (both of which are host plants for black swallowtail butterflies), and several varieties of native milkweed (which is the host plant for monarchs). We also planted native flowers like black and blue salvia and blanket flower. Because our local bees, butterflies, moths, beetles, and hummingbirds evolved alongside these plants, they provide a nourishing food source for both adults and caterpillars.

These new garden beds fill a habitat niche that was missing in Overton Park, and we've already used iNaturalist to document more than 70 insect species that have been spotted on the plants!



New and improved trails coming to Overton Park



The view across Rainbow Lake to the section of Old Forest where a new trail will be built (photo: Josh Beckemeyer).

If you've ever wondered what's behind the fence that runs along the paved Old Forest trail, you'll soon have the opportunity to see for yourself! Thanks to the Conservancy's partnership with the Memphis Zoo, the boundary fence that's kept over a dozen forested acres separate from the 126-acre Old Forest State Natural Area will be coming down.

Over the past several months, the Conservancy has been working A2H – Engineers + Architects to create an initial design for the trail. A2H has contracted with experienced trail planner Bob Richards of Bob's Trails, Trees & Gardens to design a path that will connect to the existing trail system. (That's what all the orange flagging behind the fence is about!) The trail is designed to take advantage of the varied topography of this section of forest, maximizing views and providing habitat value.

The new trail is a simple loop, because the tract isn't large enough to support a labyrinth of trails without doubling back on itself. It will link up to the current trail system at two points: at its southern edge, it will connect to the beginning of the Old Forest Loop, and at its eastern edge, it will connect to the Green Trail. The loop design will also allow us to use less heavy equipment than a more complex trail would have. Minimizing impact during construction will allow the

plants in the landscape to recover more quickly.

This February, the Conservancy team walked the new route with Bob Richards, and we were able to see the same spring wildflowers popping up that we're accustomed to in the rest of the forest. The topographical variation of the site also creates some interesting habitat juxtapositions: we noticed a cottonwood tree (which prefers low, wet areas) less than 100 feet from a white oak (which prefers to be high and dry). Like the rest of the forest, this area also features thousands of pawpaw trees and some impressive vines.

But there are some challenges. This section of forest is heavily affected by invasive species like Chinese privet, liriopse, nandina, cherry laurel, and English ivy. Much like the heavy invasive removal project the Conservancy undertook in our first few years of managing the State Natural Area, we'll need to do a major first pass at getting the invasives out. We'll contract with an invasive plant removal specialist for this initial work, and then we'll add this acreage into our volunteer-managed program. "Invasive removal is never one and done," our Director of Operations, Eric Bridges, says. Once we remove a plant, something's going to grow in its place, and we want that to be something native rather than another invasive. As

part of a grant from the Tennessee Department of Agriculture – Division of Forestry, we'll combine the control of harmful plants with efforts to re-seed native white oaks in their place.

This 17-acre section of forest was part of a 33-acre tract that Memphis City Council added to the Zoo's managed area as part of the Zoo's 1988 master plan. The other 16 acres became exhibits like Teton Trek, while this section was slated to include an exhibit focused on the local forested ecosystem. The Conservancy is incredibly grateful to the Zoo for choosing instead to reconnect this acreage with the remainder of the forest, allowing us to apply all the knowledge we've gained from managing the State Natural Area since 2012.

Preserving this section of forest also has impacts beyond the 17 acres. Some of the tall trees, including some striking white-barked sycamores, are highly visible from the Greensward and make up a significant portion of the view across Rainbow Lake. Enabling this ecosystem to thrive will benefit not just the trees themselves, but the iconic view that people expect from the Greensward.

Seed funding for this project comes from a federal Housing & Urban Development grant secured by Congressman Steve Cohen, which will also go toward other components of the Greensward parking solution, including relocating the Zoo's maintenance area, constructing a new parking lot at the Zoo, and helping us create a new soft-surface loop trail that will surround the Greensward. We'll begin bidding out the construction of the project upon receiving a notice to proceed from HUD.

We'll need your help to fully fund this project! Financial support for the Conservancy's day-to-day operations allows us to maintain Overton Park while simultaneously pursuing major improvement projects



Bob Richards (right) gives Conservancy staff a tour of the new trail area.



A map showing the location of the new forest trail.

like this one. Please consider making an additional contribution in 2024 to support operations and park improvements. You can donate now by returning the enclosed envelope or visiting overtonpark.org/give.

We anticipate the trails to open up in late 2024 or early 2025, depending on what we find when we begin invasive removal and construction. Stay tuned for updates as we get construction started! In the meantime, to hear more about this project, visit markfraley.com and download episode 112 of the Mark Fraley Podcast for a chat with the Conservancy's Eric Bridges and Melissa McMasters.

Access Improvements

We're also improving connectivity in other areas of Overton Park, with an additional \$850,000 federal appropriation secured this spring by Congressman Cohen. Many of the projects on tap, which will benefit pedestrians, cyclists, and visitors using wheelchairs, were identified during the city-wide Greenprint planning process in 2013.

We know that Overton Park has much room for improvement in sidewalk accessibility, as well as other pedestrian- and bike-friendly infrastructure. Currently, wheelchair users, pedestrians, and visitors with strollers must navigate roads and traffic in locations where there are no accessible sidewalks present.

These projects would improve the safety of visitors entering into and traveling through the park, and would help connect this important asset to our city's growing network of bike and pedestrian infrastructure. Stay tuned for more details about this work!

OP9 heads into another busy summer

With more than 26,000 rounds of golf in the books in 2023, the Overton Park 9 is already on pace for another successful year.

Early in June, the course played host to a unique tournament: the Overton Park 99. Participating golfers each played (and walked) the course 11 times in a single day as a fundraiser for the Overton Park Junior Open, Overton Park Conservancy, and the Loren Roberts Scholarship Fund through The First Tee. Organized by Will Frazier and John Irvine, the event attracted 15 golfers, who together raised \$54,000.

Frazier says, “The fifteen brave (or crazy, or both!) souls that took on the 99-hole walk are pleased to report no injuries, lots of fun, and a successful fundraising effort! Feedback from players and supporters was incredible and a big shout-out to Patrick Canale and the OP9 staff for all their help.” The golfers totaled 1,500 holes played (“a few guys couldn’t help themselves and played a few more” than the 1,485 they’d pledged to complete), 415 miles walked, around 835,000 steps counted, 418 birdies made, and 13.5 hours of fun. If you’d like to get involved with this unique event next year, visit overtonpark99.com.

Overton Park 99 also resulted in the first of two holes-in-one on the course within just a few weeks. During the tournament, Chase Harris hit a 220-yard



Harrison Scott tees off on the first hole during a summer round.

shot on the fifth hole, which is a par 4 featuring a hidden punch bowl green. (He also set the all-time course record during one round, shooting a 10-under-par 24.) Later in June, another golfer mastered the par-3.5 sixth hole in a single shot.

This month, the Overton Park Junior Open, presented by Nike, returned for its third year on the renovated greens. The tournament, which has been

played at Overton Park since 1947, this year welcomed 160 registrants from ages 7 through 16 for eight-player flights of match play. Places for the free event were full within days of registration opening, reflecting the work of the OPJO committee to revive this historic event over the last several years. Players teed off in wind, showers, and brilliant sunshine, enjoying all the elements that make this course so unique.

OPJO winners will be celebrated in a lasting way at the golf clubhouse going forward. The new Grand Champions Walkway will contain pavers engraved with the names of the winners of each year’s championship flight in the oldest boys’ and oldest girls’ age groups. OPJO committee member and former Shelby County Historian Jimmy Ogle was able to track down winners going back to 1987 in time to get those pavers installed for the start of this year’s tournament. He’s still working to collect the names of winners from 1947-1986, so if you have any information, get in touch with us!



Left: Teeing off at the start of match play at this year’s Overton Park Junior Open
Right: Will Frazier hits a shot during the OP99 tournament (photo by Ashley White, Grind City Designs)

An artist among us: in memory of Guy Church

by Fields Falcone

Early one morning I was heading to East Parkway to check on the pavilion for a rental. This gentle soul was locking his bike to his usual post, and I decided, after a few earlier attempts at “hello,” that I would boldly introduce myself. I was drawn to this private, humble regular and wanted him to know he was welcome park family. He said, “Oh! Hello, my name is Guy.” I thought he might have just made that up on the spot! Suspenders, rounded hat, sensible all-black attire — he seemed from another century, wandering with slow deliberation among the frantic urban dream-chasers.

Little did I know Guy Church was well known in the park and beyond.

Park supporter Cristina Pinkham had a similar bold approach to meeting the mystery man: “I headed straight toward him and introduced myself! He told me right off that he was an artist and made three rounds of the park a day.”

Artist, indeed. Church began drawing in the late 80s while living in Wisconsin where he grew up. After a 1994 exhibition in Madison, Guy made his way to Memphis and had gallery shows from Arkansas to New York, including Tops Gallery downtown. He was self-taught, often depicting imaginary human subjects in regular moments of life and familiar surroundings, using primarily charcoal and some colored pencil.

Matt Ducklo, gallerist of Tops, serendipitously met the love of his life through Guy’s art. Dr. Nia Zalamea-Ducklo was working with a community outreach nonprofit and heard about Church’s talents. Matt also loved his work, and the two met while helping coordinate a small art show of Guy’s drawings at the nonprofit’s headquarters. They fell in love, and Matt proposed to Nia at the Overton Park golf clubhouse!

All these remarkable details and many more came out at the celebration of Guy’s life in January this

year. The Ducklo family kept an eye on Church’s basic needs in the latter years, even coordinating his final resting place at Elmwood Cemetery. Church had many siloed communities that met each other on that day — ball players from Tobey Park where he frequently watched games, his regular Bible study group, coworkers at Garner Framing where he worked one day a week, the art community he met through attending Tops and other gallery openings, and his vast Overton Park family.

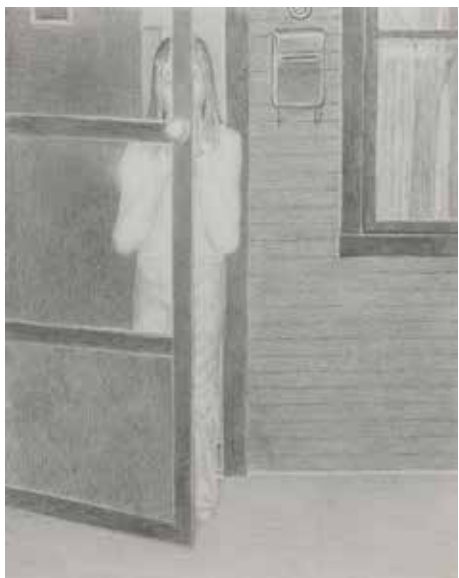
Park supporters Meg Jones and Bill Powell walked with Guy most mornings, greeting all the regularly walked dogs by name with treats and love. Kay Lait fondly recalls sitting with Church and Pinkham as he showed them his sketchbook, explaining story, technique, and process for each drawing, and sharing his love of the 18th century painter Chardin.

Staff and park regulars were drawn to his reserved, peaceful presence, and he is deeply missed. Pinkham shared, “He was a special visitor in the park. He built more of a community here — we got to know each other better because of him.”

In Church’s words, “People may not always be doing magnificent things, but in them is a very special wonder that is an artful thing.” (*Miracles of the Spirit: Folk, Art, and Stories from Wisconsin*, Krug et al. 2005).



Guy Church takes a fellow park visitor’s dog for a stroll around Rainbow Lake (photo by Bill Powell)



Two of the works Church exhibited at Tops Gallery: “The Great Outside World” and “Foul Ball.”

Community connections form at Overton Park

Last year, we launched regular community programming at Overton Park, bringing park visitors together to learn, play, create, and meet new people. As we move through our second summer of programs, here's a look at what we've been up to so far this year.

Nature Education

Our signature offerings continue to be in helping visitors learn more about ecology and conservation. For adults, our Science Café series covered topics from the use of fire in ecosystems to the geology of the Memphis Sand Aquifer. Third Thursday Treks with our Programs Manager Dr. Malle Carrasco-Harris explored insect vision and the secrets of bird migration. Our Nature 101 series returned, with staff and volunteers sharing their knowledge of the natural world. April's Nature 101 coincided with the global

City Nature Challenge, in which cities competed to observe the most wildlife over four days. Memphians contributed 2,955 observations of 921 species, which put us in the top 20% of cities around the world!

For families, we brought back our spring break Discovery Week, which included a scavenger hunt and the RiverRoots Festival in partnership with CLEAN Memphis. Our Interpretive Ranger Heather Grotzinger also hosted children's programs including storytimes and activities focused on Leave No Trace principles.

Social Activities

In February, we hosted a Mardi Growl event with Hollywood Feed that brought visitors out with their colorfully costumed dogs. And in April, we welcomed around 600 visitors to the Greensward for Total Eclipse of the Park, co-hosted with Brooks Museum.



Clockwise from left: Memphis Parks and Keepin' It P brought their Poetry in the Park event to the Greensward; Hollywood Feed and the Conservancy co-hosted a Mardi Growl event and dog costume contest at Overton Park; our children's ranger programs included a scavenger hunt in the Old Forest; Malle visited fourth-grade classrooms at Rozelle and Brewster Elementary Schools to offer a lesson in how humans impact landscapes.

Outreach Activities

We continue to bring students into the park to apply what they're learning in the classroom. Partnering with CLEAN Memphis, Malle hosted fourth-graders from Rozelle and Brewster Elementary schools for a nature outing and invasive plant pull, and then visited their classrooms to discuss how animals are impacted by human development. We also hosted sixth graders from University Middle School for a scavenger hunt and forest tour, and worked with seniors from Compass Midtown High School to plant oak saplings and do trail work. In June, we brought students from Carpenter Art Garden to the park for a summer camp with the Conservancy, Overton Park Shell, Brooks Museum, and Memphis Zoo.

Wellness Programs

Tai chi classes with instructor Marjean Liggett and yoga with Cecelia Cordera of Delta Groove Yoga will continue in the formal gardens through early fall. Our

Stewardship Manager Fields Falcone is offering a monthly mindfulness walk in the Old Forest, and Malle built a close-knit group during weekly Wednesday walks in the winter and spring. Look for those to return this fall!

Creative Activities

Participants shared poetry and spoken-word enhanced by live keyboard music at Poetry in the Park, co-hosted by Memphis Parks and Keepin' it P. Families painted bird houses and flower pots in the formal gardens at our spring Paint & Picnic events, and our nature journaling walks allowed for intentional observation and reflection.

What's coming up this fall? NatureZen Month will return in October, with more Nature 101 hikes, a tree ID course, a community tree giveaway, and more. For updates, sign up for our e-mail newsletter at overtonpark.org/email and keep an eye on the calendar at overtonpark.org/events!



Clockwise from left: our Nature 101 series put participants in touch with fungi, plants, birds, and insects; we partnered with CLEAN Memphis for the RiverRoots Fest, a tree giveaway and environmental education fair; Carpenter Art Garden students participated in a leaf identification activity; wildlife experts from Rhodes College and the University of Memphis helped us identify observations made in the City Nature Challenge.

Nicole Dorsey and Vaughan Dewar embrace nature and community at Overton Park

by Fields Falcone

If you're lucky, on any given day you might run into park supporters and neighbors Nicole Dorsey and Vaughan Dewar walking their beloved canine kids Tiger and Shelby on the trails. You can't miss their bright smiles and their beaming love of the Old Forest.

Vaughan found his way to Memphis in the 90s after growing up in England, Africa, and upstate New York. He landed his dream career in technical engineering with Brother as their first American project manager, frequently traveling to Japan and Europe with the company. It was a perfect match for his skills and interests, and he grew to love Memphis, too, with its rich theater scene and ample green spaces to balance his life in tech.

Nicole is an artist, educator, and entrepreneur. She grew up in south Memphis enjoying other city parks with her family, walking regularly at Audubon Park before moving to Midtown, where she and Vaughan raised their child at Overton Park's playgrounds. The family love of theater bloomed in their daughter – she is majoring in musical theater in college. Park staff met Nicole through partner environmental education events with Carpenter Art Garden, and she now runs her own face painting and body art enterprise, Memphis Face Painting LLC, regularly providing services for events at Overton Park, the Brooks Museum, and across the city for private and public functions.

The connection to Overton Park starts at their front door! Vaughan and Nicole live down one of the residential streets across from the East Parkway picnic area, and their 100-year-old home was the only standing structure on their side of the street post-demolition for the Interstate 40 extension planned to run right through the park. The Supreme Court ruling to save the park in perpetuity may have been handed down in 1971, but the revitalization of the affected neighborhood took decades. Nicole and Vaughan are now surrounded by beautiful new homes and



Vaughan and Nicole at 2022's Center of a Century celebration in the Overton Park formal gardens.

neighbors; they wisely bought the lot next door before the Binghamton building boom and enjoy a half-acre in the center of the city. Even their once-stray rescue pups hail from the empty fields they used to walk around their home 10 years ago!

On their daily dog walks through the trail system in the Old Forest, Nicole and Vaughan reflect on their love of the park for the serenity, nature, and community it provides. They return the love through Conservancy support as Roots Society (annual giving) and Poplar Society (estate planning) members.

Nicole shares that the park connections and relationships “make you feel seen, make you feel appreciated – we meet people we probably never would have met from all different walks of life every day.” She loves the winter especially, with the expansive trail views through the bare trees and the community of “diehards” that shows up for it. Nicole has also made rich professional connections that have blossomed into family friendships.

For Vaughan, his most special moments are through internal reflection when immersed in forest bathing in the woods. “I'll take Tiger for a run, and sometimes I will be in deep thought, and something will come to me as an unexpected revelation. The trails foster these moments because of the intense beauty and wildness – I feel safe and at home in the Old Forest.”



Nicole teaches at a Conservancy Paint & Picnic event.

Tree cores get to the heart of the matter

Many of us might walk into a place like the Old Forest, look at the very tallest trees, and think “Wow, those must be so *old*.”

But just like with people, size doesn’t necessarily tell us a lot about age. To use some giants of Memphis as an example, Marc Gasol is much taller than Al Green, but Al Green has been around quite a bit longer. There are a lot of factors that contribute to a tree’s size: its species, the amount of light and water it received, and disturbances it experienced. To get an idea of a tree’s true age, we have to look at its rings by taking a small core sample of its trunk.

When Conservancy Director of Operations Eric Bridges began examining tree cores in the Old Forest with students from Rhodes College back in 2015, he found that the oldest class of trees dated to around 1835, making them about 190 years old today. But when former Rhodes College and current College of Idaho professor Dr. Robert Laport asked him to assist on a tree coring project, Eric got a surprise: a tulip poplar in Overton Park that appears to be over 220 years old.

True to the maxim that size is not a proxy for age, this tree (found on the Green Trail) was not among the largest examples of its species. The growth rings closest to its center are very close together, indicating slow growth in the tree’s early years. This is unusual for tulip poplars, which require a lot of sun to get started and thus typically grow quite rapidly. (“Did it have a rough childhood?” Eric wonders.) For a tulip poplar to grow that slowly and still stay alive, something other than shade must have been checking its growth.

This tree also has a hollow, dark spot toward the middle, which can sometimes indicate that the tree experienced fire, but another tree Eric cored at Meeman-Shelby State Forest that’s roughly the same age doesn’t show any evidence of fire disturbance. It’s more likely that the tulip poplar just has some rotting tissue on the inside, though it continues to grow.



Eric uses a Biltmore stick to determine the diameter of a 225-year-old tulip poplar.

Dr. Laport’s research aims to categorize five Memphis-area urban forested natural areas according to how well they meet the standards for “old growth.” Eric took samples of 4-5 living trees from Overton Park, Meeman-Shelby, T.O. Fuller State Park, Nesbit Park, and the Lucius Burch State Natural Area, including oaks and tulip poplars from each site. Dr. Laport will conduct a thorough analysis incorporating each forest’s species composition and structural features (e.g., large trees, coarse woody debris, etc.) and estimate their ballpark ages from the sampled cores, but initial results show that Overton Park’s trees are the oldest. While Meeman-Shelby also had a 225-year old tree, its remaining sampled trees were much younger than Overton’s dominant age class of 190 years. Nesbit Park in Bartlett was only returned to a forested landscape in the 1900s, and its oldest trees are around 75 years old.

An old-growth forest typically meets five criteria: trees over 150 years old, dead trees left standing, pits and mounds created in the soil by old trees falling down, fallen trees left on the ground to decompose, and a relative lack of human disturbance. While it’s difficult for any urban forested natural area to meet the fifth standard, Overton Park does satisfy the first four. Since Overton Park comes the closest to meeting the old-growth standard, Dr. Laport will compare the other four parks to it as his research continues. He’ll dive deeper into the other categories, including conducting surveys of non-tree vegetation to see whether forests get more or less diverse as their trees age.

Coring trees often brings up more questions than it answers—why was our 225-year-old tulip poplar growing so slowly, but the 190-year-old trees were growing so fast? But the fact that a 4-millimeter piece of wood can offer a glimpse into 225 years of history is another reason that we’re excited to continue learning all we can about the mysteries of the Old Forest.



The core of a bald cypress tree sampled at Lucius Burch State Natural Area.

Overton Park Conservancy gratefully acknowledges the individuals and organizations who made donations and in-kind (noted with italics) gifts from January 1, 2023 to December 31, 2023. We also thank those donors who wished to remain anonymous. If we have inadvertently omitted the name of one of our supporters, we sincerely apologize.

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A Magical Night at Overton Park

a garden gala honoring Tina Sullivan

Saturday, October 26, 2024

Overton Park Formal Gardens

Ticket Information Coming Soon

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Our signature event returns to the formal gardens this October! A Magical Night at Overton Park honors individuals, corporations, and organizations who embody and uplift the Conservancy's mission through volunteerism, activism, and leadership. This year, we'll be honoring Tina's twelve years of transformative leadership with cocktails, great food, music, and a festive park atmosphere. Watch for your invitation soon!

For VIP and sponsorship opportunities, please contact Kaci Murley at 901-214-5450 or kmurley@overtonpark.org.

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