One Tree at a Time, a Volunteer Helps Youth in Detention Process Grief

March 19, 2024

Jana Jarosh at planting event, February 24, 2024

It's a sunny, chilly Saturday morning at the City of Gresham's Nadaka Nature Park, a 10-acre forested tract that was previously the property of the youth development organization Camp Fire. A planting event by the Portland-area nonprofit organization Friends of Trees is about to begin and a diverse group of people in outdoors gear have gathered near an assortment of shovels, buckets, gardening gloves, ready to dig holes and plant trees.

Jana Jarosh is here in a volunteer capacity (she's volunteered with Friends of Trees for a decade) but today she's working on behalf of the people she serves as a Multnomah County Community Health Nurse: the youth in detention at Donald E. Long Home in the Juvenile Justice Complex.

Jarosh and two fellow Friends of Trees volunteers are planting 10 incense cedars, a species native to the Pacific Northwest, each tree specifically in remembrance of a beloved person one or more of the youth have lost.

Jarosh (at right) and assistant volunteers get a briefing from a Friends of Trees lead (at left) about how best to plant an incense cedar.

“They may be young, but they are no strangers to loss”

Some of the people being memorialized with trees at today's planting died years ago; some passed away recently, perhaps even during a youth's current time in detention.

Jarosh says that in her nursing duties at Donald E. Long, "I would hear their stories, and almost every time there would be a story of loss: an aunt, a brother, a cousin, a homie.

“They may be young, but they are not strangers to loss," she continues. "I realized how much grief goes on. (Detention) is not a great place to process grief; emotion can be seen as a weakness, but you still have it.”

It dawned on her one day that "we could plant trees as a memorial, so that people who are locked up can visit once they get out, and process their grief. The tree would be 'theirs,' symbolizing the spirit of the person they lost."

This is the simple but effective goal of Roots of Love, a grassroots community initiative operated independently but with the support of Friends of Trees.

Roots of Love offers youth in detention the opportunity to dedicate a tree to a departed family member or friend. An individual or group of youth can write a letter to the person they are memorializing and have it planted in the ground with the tree. After the planting, participating youth receive a photo of their tree with a sign noting their name and the names of the people being memorialized, as well as the GPS coordinates for the spot where the tree was planted.

Once the youth has completed their time in detention, they can visit this special tree and take what they will from the experience.

Ideally, Jarosh says, the tree “will become not just a symbolic connection, but a physical connection” to their loved one. "They can visit, bring picnics, or whatever they want."

A trauma-informed project

Bringing Roots of Love into juvenile detention required the buy-in of staff, as Jarosh was trading her nursing role for a volunteer one for this endeavor and thus needed staff support to do the work of the project. She found believers in Juvenile Custody Services Specialists Kim Pohl and Karie Will, who work with volunteers as Evidence-Based Practices leads.

"A lot of kids feel really powerless in here, especially when things (like a death) happen in their families and they can’t be there," Pohl says, "so this is a way to honor the people they loved."

Pohl also notes that this effort is consistent with the Department of Community Justice's mission of providing trauma-informed care and practice, recognizing the ubiquity of trauma in clients.

Participation in the program is voluntary for the youth in detention. Pohl and Jarosh went from dorm to dorm and pitched the Roots of Love concept. “I told them, ‘if this is meaningful to you, fill out this sheet of paper,'" Jarosh says. "They self-identified (as participants). Depending on their wishes I could read aloud their letters aloud before the planting, giving them a way to say the goodbye they didn’t get to say (in person). It was super meaningful to them.”

Should Jarosh someday happen to move to a different nursing assignment within the County, Pohl says they would definitely like to keep the Roots of Love project going in detention.

“Not all the kids wanted to do it and that’s OK, but we leave it open to people who are ready," Pohl says. She adds that many of the youth immediately saw the value of their specially planted trees being there, growing taller and stronger, so they can someday visit and experience the tranquility of the moment.

“This is easily one of the more meaningful things we’ve ever presented to the kids. This really touches them. And not all kids had recent losses, but they still had a grandma they loved and still miss. It’s really sweet to read what they wrote.”