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# OEC NEWSLETTER

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Official publication of the Onondaga Earth Corps

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## Connecting with Local Schools

BY KATE ABEL



Students from Blodgett Middle School plant trees at a formerly vacant lot on Tully Street as part of the 2023 Arbor Day celebration. Trees were planted to memorialize Aisha Haskins-Stephens and Brexialea Torres Ortiz.

OEC strives to empower youth through hands-on community and environmental service. So, when we had the opportunity to work with Nottingham High School's Career and Technical Education (CTE) program, we jumped at the opportunity. Nottingham offers a Natural Resources-focused CTE program, where students from 9th through 12th grade develop an integrated view of the biological, ecological, and social dimensions of the environment. A huge component of the program includes exposing students to environmental career opportunities through guest lectures and field trips.

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### *Upcoming Events*

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**04/01 First Day of Young Adult Season.** Welcome to the crew!

**04/20 Community Volunteer Day for Earth Day.** Join us to prep various gardens for Spring with community partners. Sign up here: [bit.ly/EarthDay042024](https://bit.ly/EarthDay042024)

**04/20 Party for the Planet** at Rosamond Gifford Zoo

**04/20 Earth Day Celebration - Plastic vs. Planet** at Baltimore Woods Nature Center

**04/27 Community Tree Planting** in Eastwood with SHA. Sign up here: [bit.ly/OEC-427](https://bit.ly/OEC-427)

**04/27 Syracuse Mets Game.** Buy tickets to the Mets game through this link to support OEC: [bit.ly/OECMets](https://bit.ly/OECMets)

**05/04 I Love My Park Day** at Schiller Park. Join us to learn about Schiller Park, pick up litter, and remove invasive species. Sign up here: [bit.ly/LoveSchiller](https://bit.ly/LoveSchiller)

**05/25 SUFFP Community Planting** at Springdale near Corcoran High School

### *Thank you to our Sponsors*

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# Interview with Owerrie Bacon

Owerrie (O): My name is Owerrie Bacon. I'm an Advanced Young Adult (AYA) Crew Member. A good friend of mine, Jay Porch, introduced me to the job, told me all about it. I started with OEC back in 2021 for a season and came back for three seasons now. I started as a Crew Member first and worked my way up to AYA.

Megan (M): How did that feel?

O: It felt like I was going about something. I was doing something with myself, moving on up, learning.

M: Are there any big differences between your past jobs and working with OEC?

O: Yeah, there is a big difference. We get to work outside and really get in tune with the community. It's hands-on. I like that it can be different every other day.

M: What is your favorite part about working at OEC?

O: My favorite part about OEC is that when we're outside working, people watch us, and when our job gets done it inspires them and makes them happy. I like making people in the community happy.

M: Speaking of community, you've worked at quite a few of our volunteer events. Do you have a favorite?

O: I would say the Westcott Fair. We could walk around, meet a lot of different people and see what they're out there for. I like meeting new faces and figuring out what their job is and what they do.

M: Do you have any highlights from this past season?

O: Going from not knowing what to do and now I've mastered it. At first I didn't know what I was doing at all and now I can just see a tree and be like, "this tree needs to be pruned!"



"I was doing something with myself, moving up, learning."

Owerrie pruning a street tree during the Winter 2024 season.



"I like making people in the community happy."

Owerrie on the north side of Schiller Park. The crew worked with J & J Landscaping to implement soil erosion control on the slope.

M: That's cool. Would you say that pruning has been your favorite project?

O: Pruning trees is up there, but I really like planting trees. I like to come back later on and look at the tree like, "Wow, I planted this."

M: Do you have a favorite species?

O: Yeah I like the ginkgo tree because of the leaf shape and the grooves in the bark. I like the color, too.

M: Has anything changed in your life while you've worked at OEC because of working with OEC?

O: I feel like OEC really made me mature a lot. I'm working on getting my drivers license right now and I want to get into college soon.

M: That's awesome. Do you have any idea of where you want to go or what you want to study?

O: I don't want to leave my family, so I would go to OCC or Bryant & Stratton. I want to go to school for something that's really going to excite me and make me want to show up every day.

M: A while ago you were on TV. Can you tell me a little bit about that? What was it like for you?

O: Yeah! It was back in 2021. It was me, Jay Porch, Gregory Michel – all of us went. We told them about our experience with the job. I'd never been on TV before, so at first I had butterflies but then I was like, "Alright we got it. We can't go out there and freeze up." And they basically were asking us regular random questions. It was a great opportunity. I definitely liked it. It was a good feeling being up there.



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# Welcome New Crew Leaders



**MICHAEL POWELL**  
CREW LEADER

Michael Powell joined OEC with the inspiration to grow not only in the knowledge of self development, but also use that knowledge to spread and share the wealth of the community and environment to the youth and members of the community.

“I have an enormous passion for family, outside activities, and cleaning and beautifying my home, neighborhood, and community including landscaping and exterior surface cleaning.

I am dedicated and committed to creating ideas for more programs and services that could further increase the development and benefits of the environment and community as a whole.

On becoming a crew leader with this Organization it is my drive to help shape and mold having a hand directly in the lives of the future generations. I feel OEC is my calling to come up and keep going on!”



**ADRIAN REID**  
YOUTH CREW LEADER

“My name is Adrian. I’m a Youth Crew Leader and an Advanced Young Adult Crew Member at OEC. I’ve been working with OEC for about 2 years from a Crew Member to now a Youth Crew Leader. I’ve been thinking about going back to school to get a degree in Forestry, but for now I’m all hands on trying out everything. Inside and out, I’m usually a loud out-going person, always up for an adventure. On the other hand you can catch me usually sitting at the parks on a nice day listening to music and the outdoors and coloring.”



**GABRIELLA MIRANDA-DIAZ**  
CREW LEADER

Since childhood, Gabriela Miranda-Diaz has been an outspoken advocate for social and environmental equity. In 2021, she graduated from the CUNY BA program with a bachelors degree in Environmental Sustainability. During her studies, she conducted scientific research in conservation biology and food justice in New York City and Puerto Rico. Upon graduating, Gabriela worked for NYC Parks as a wildlife monitor and then as an Urban Park Ranger. Her first published work, a chapter in Decolonizing Paradise, was released in October 2022 by Peter Lang Publishing. Gabriela is currently employed by the Onondaga Earth Corps, where she is a young adult crew leader.



**TERRANCE T.C. VALDEZ**  
CREW LEADER

“My name is Terrance Taylor Castro Valdes. My story started in Palmetto Baptist Hospital in Columbia, South Carolina. From age 0 to 11 I bounced around in and out of homes in rural South Carolina, with short stays in California and even northeastern Georgia. I grew up loving to draw, read books, and watch cartoons.

When my family ended up in Syracuse there was a bit of a culture shock. All the children stayed indoors with cell phones, tablets and video games.

Sitting in a classroom was hard for me because I was a constant daydreamer. If there was a window to the outdoors, my eyes stayed transfixed to the beauty of nature buzzing outside of my school.

I lost that love for nature in frigid Syracuse winters. I didn't know it at the time, but a 17 year old version of myself would reclaim that lost passion with the assist of a fierce, strong mother, who would will me out of the house to explore the city and a coincidental encounter with an organization known as Onondaga Earth Corps for a simple job opportunity.”

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# Connecting with Local Schools

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BY KATE ABEL

This winter, our Advanced Young Adult (AYA) crew has established a relationship with the Natural Resources class through collaboration with Natural Resources CTE teacher, Jaime Rodriguez, and Work-Based Learning Coordinator, Brittany Mazzaferro. AYAs CC and Adrian presented to the classes on who we are and what we do as an urban youth conservation corps. We were able to showcase a number of our active projects including: city tree pruning, on-going natural areas restoration in Schiller Park, and maintenance on legacy rain gardens such as 515 Tully.

We gladly shared employment opportunities with students, as we are actively recruiting youth for our Spring and Summer 2024 programs. Our hope is that students will find in OEC a natural way to put what they have learned in the classroom into practice, all while connecting with the larger Syracuse community.

We are excited to be doing just that this Spring. A plan is in the works for OEC crews to host a class planting day to plant trees right on Nottingham campus. We've found that engaging with groups in literal, hands-in-the-soil fieldwork to be the most rewarding for both crew and volunteer participants. If we're really lucky, it offers a sense of ownership over the trees we leave behind.



Kate Abel (left) and Omarian Leroux (right) during the 2022 Arbor Day planting with students from Salem Hyde Elementary School.



# Introducing our Board Members



**BABETTE BAKER**  
PRESIDENT

As a consultant and nonprofit professional, Babette Baker has 35+ years of experience supporting nonprofits, businesses, and municipalities. Although she has been consulting in the sector for many years, she officially launched Paideia PM in 2013. Her experience includes delivering workshops on capacity building, grant writing, board development, grassroots engagement, and program evaluation. Ms. Baker is very active in her community, and she sits on several nonprofit boards and donates 10% of Paideia's services to under-resourced organizations in her community.



**CYNTHIA RENEE DOWDELL**  
SECRETARY

Cynthia is a native of Syracuse. She serves as Secretary on the board of OEC and Co-Chair of the Healthy, Empowered and Loved Initiative of the Women of Pearls. She is committed to staying true to self, and forever seeking growth in every aspect of life. She encourages women to believe that healthier women result in healthier families which makes stronger communities and a better society.



**PATRONA JONES-ROWSER**  
VICE PRESIDENT

A lifelong resident of Syracuse, Patrona is a vested stakeholder within her South-side community and throughout the city. She is the owner of StayMonet Opulent Events decorating comp-any and is an avid spokesperson for community reinvestment. As chair of the TNT Sector 3 Neighborhood Beautification task force, she strives to identify deteriorating, vacant and abandoned homes and spaces for revitalization and placemaking.



**JEFF SMITH, CPA**  
TREASURER

A board member since April of 2020, Jeff combines financial expertise with a passion for youth empowerment and environmental resilience. With a background in nonprofit finance and accounting, he ensures financial stewardship and sustainability. When not crunching numbers, Jeff enjoys cycling and exploring local trails.



**ELI MACDONALD**  
DIRECTOR EMERITUS

The Onondaga Earth Corps (OEC) was started to help the youth and the comm-unity. It provides a job during the summer to keep young people busy so they don't take a wrong turn in life. My objective was to share with others who had the same vision. Then the Eli MacDonald Green Team was born.



*Oh the trees we prune  
Whether rain, wind, shine or snow  
We don't care, we go*

Eliad Kane, Crew Leader

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# Interview with Adrian Reid

Adrian: My name is Adrian. I go by she/her pronouns. I'm a Youth Crew Leader and Advanced Young Adult. I've been working with OEC for about 2 years now.

Megan: How did you end up working for OEC?

A: I was going from job to job to job and one summer I realized I needed something steady. I wanted to know more about where I lived my whole life. I didn't know half the stuff I know now. Especially Kirk Park – that it was a race track with horses. And the outdoor classroom, that's really cool. I didn't know there were fish in the creek. I wouldn't eat them, but we got fish.

M: What's your favorite season, your favorite project area, and your favorite tree?

A: Favorite season is a teeter-totter between Summer and Fall. Summer because the youth- they're so hilarious. They're always something. Nice group of characters. I like the Fall because of tree planting. It's more aggressive in the Fall than the Spring. That's why I like it.

M: Nice. So what's your favorite tree?

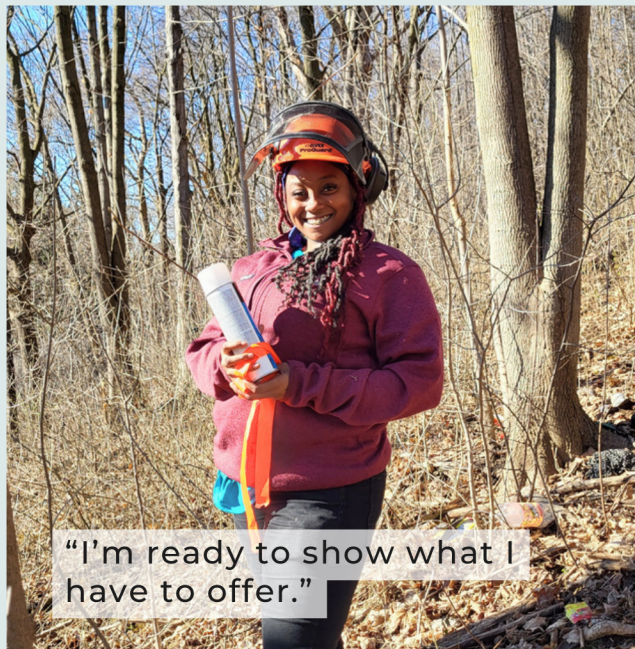
A: Tulip tree – I like the shape of them. And the London plane tree – I like how they get white, ashy, and huge.

M: In your two years of being here, what project are you most proud of?

A: Being a part of Schiller. It was me, Steve, and Nuke – we marked trees that got removed before we installed the erosion control there. It was pretty cool to go back and watch it transform. I can't wait to start working on the North side of Schiller.



Adrian working in the median on South Townsend, a large Green Infrastructure site, during the Summer 2023 season.



Adrian in a forested section of Schiller Park in late-Winter 2024.

M: What are you most looking forward to as a crew leader?

A: Being a mentor. I'm ready to be the big sister that they never had. That type of thing.

M: I'm excited for you. Since you started working for OEC, has anything changed in your life or the way that you look at things?

A: I have so much more patience. My communication skills, too. How I look at my finances has changed – I'm sick of living check-to-check, that's what I'm now starting to realize. I want a house with a nice fence and I want my future kids to be set and not struggle. I have big girl goals.

M: What's been your favorite event with OEC?

A: Arborday, the one that we recently had. I liked the reason behind it, how it was for Brexialee and Aisha. I used to walk past that empty lot and think "they need to do something with this!" To come back and plant trees – it's nice. They're going to put a little bench and a little library back there. I think that's pretty cool. The other one was the big Block Blitz in the Lemoyne area.

M: Why did you like that one so much?

A: There were a lot of people there. I was very surprised at the turn out. It got me thinking about how we could spread it to more people.

M: What are your hopes and dreams for this season?

A: I want to be a YA Crew Leader by the Summer. I'm ready to show what I have to offer.



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## Introducing our Board Members, Continued



**ANDREW M. MAXWELL, MPA**  
MEMBER

Andrew comes from more than a decade of public service in various leadership roles with the City of Syracuse and Onondaga County, including as the mayor's Director of Policy & Innovation, Director of the Syracuse-Onondaga County Planning Agency, Syracuse's Director of Planning & Sustainability, and as a neighborhood planner. Andrew is a proud graduate of Syracuse's Corcoran High School, and lives on Syracuse's Eastside with his wife, Lindsay.



**EBONY FARROW**  
MEMBER

I am a city of Syracuse native, a youth and community social justice advocate. Program Manager of Pathways to Apprenticeship. I am passionate about helping youth and adults gain access to livable wage employment as well as all other natural rights due.



**MEQDAD ABDUL ALI**  
MEMBER

Meqdad's journey with OEC began in 2017 when he joined the organization as a crew leader, right after moving to the US as a new American. This marked the start of his commitment to Syracuse, where he found joy in working with the community and the youth involved. Later, he transitioned into the role of Program Coordinator, playing a part in the city's environmental efforts and youth development. He now serves as Program Coordinator for the Master of Arts in the International Relations department at University of Maryland. Despite this new role, Meqdad remains engaged with Syracuse, serving on the board of OEC.



**JAMES BURT**  
MEMBER

James graduated from West Genesee High School and has a degree in Landscape Architecture from SUNY ESF. He has 10 years of experience in golf course maintenance and construction and has worked at Landscapes East since 2015 and is the owner of Landscapes East since 2020. James is a resident of the City of Syracuse and lives with his partner Kristin and their dog Coda.



**ALICIA ERNEST**  
MEMBER

Alicia Ernest is the Program Director with FOCUS Greater Syracuse, Inc.. She is a graduate of Citizens Academy, Nourishing Tomorrow's Leaders, and is currently participating in the CNY Political Leadership Institute. Alicia also volunteers with the New York Master Naturalist program. Her dedication to sustainability and the environment is reflected in her work as a Board Member of OEC. In addition to her board membership, she serves on the Fund Development Committee to implement strategies for the organization's growth.



**ALLISON SPEICHER**  
MEMBER

Allison Speicher was on the OEC staff from 2014-2015. She has a bachelors in Environmental Studies from SUNY ESF and a master's of Environmental Health and Safety management from RIT. She currently serves as an Officer in the New York Army National Guard, and is a fulltime mom.

**JONNELL ROBINSON**  
MEMBER

**JOSHUA TURNQUEST**  
MEMBER

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# Reflections on Pruning

BY MIRANDA GREGORY

My favorite trees to prune this season have been basswoods and ginkgo trees. The soft wood of a basswood gives a satisfying and easy cut every time and makes pruning quick and effortless. Ginkgo trees are easy to navigate when making decisions during pruning and typically aren't overcrowded with a lot of branches. My least favorite tree to prune is easily a zelkova. The branches grow upwards and tightly together, making it difficult to navigate your tools around the tree and leads to endless decisions when choosing which branches to take and which to leave. While I would enjoy skipping every zelkova I encounter, pruning is important for the health of our trees and ensures they're able to grow properly for years to come. The growing number of trees in Syracuse is helping cool the city, clean our air, and improve mental health for those around so it's important we continue to take care of our trees.

BY ELIAD KANE

My favorite trees to prune this season have been basswood trees. I enjoy pruning these trees the most because their wood is much softer than others and results in a very satisfying chop or saw when pruning. As for my least favorite tree, I would have to say a hawthorn tree that has been previously stressed out. If it was poorly pruned in the past, or something else that causes the tree a lot of stress, chances are by the time we show up to prune the tree, there will be overgrown sprouts everywhere and the whole canopy will be a mess. This clutter of criss-crossing and wacky growth results in a very tedious and frustrating time pruning. However, despite all the time needed and frustration caused by a tree like this, it is still worth it to prune because if left alone, the tree's structure will only get worse and have even bigger problems in the future.



Eliad pruning a zelkova tree (left) and a monster of an overgrown hawthorn (right)



# Interview with Omarian

Omarian: My name's Omarian. My pronouns are he/him. My position at OEC is as an Advanced Young Adult Crew Member. I've been with OEC for, I think, a little bit over a year now in total.

Megan: What are some of your highlights from past seasons working with OEC?

O: I liked that one volunteer event at that memorial site in the fall. I liked that one. It was nice that we talked more than usual instead of just getting started and that's it.

M: What is your favorite season?

O: My favorite season in general is spring. When it gets to the middle of spring, assuming the weather isn't being all weird, it's the perfect temperature for me. It's not too hot but it's still a little warm. The breeze is nice. Smells nice outside.

M: What's your favorite project area to work in with OEC?

O: It's probably planting trees even though it's also the most annoying sometimes.

M: What makes planting trees annoying?

O: When you get a spot you dig in and you just find a huge brick or a part of pavement or something. Why is this even here in the first place? Or really bad roots. Then you shift the hole two times and there's still roots there. Or if you try to pound one of the stakes, keep getting stuck, and I keep shifting the stake hole and there's still something there.



Tay (left) and Omarian (right) at the Erie Canal Park for our Summer 2023 graduation celebration



Omarian during a volunteer event at the Kwanzaa Garden in the Summer 2023 season.

M: So why is it your favorite?

O: I like the pace of the work. I also don't really like working in one spot for a long time. It's a good workout, too.

M: What's your least favorite kind of work?

O: Natural Areas because it is usually really annoying terrain. Also just how tedious it is. You can be there all day, look at this spot you're in, think you did a whole bunch of work, then look right next to it and there's still so much.

M: Right, it seems never-ending. That reminds me. How did you like the day that we were working with J&J in Schiller? I heard that you're talking to them about a work shadow.

O: Yeah, I was talking to Pat. I shook his hand before he left. I liked that, I liked the work.

M: Nice. Are there any OEC projects that you're proud of?

O: The places I've planted a tree, I like that.

M: Why do you think that that makes you feel so good?

O: It's just like anything else, you put in effort to do something and you can see the tangible result. It's like "Yeah, I did that." It's kind of like if you get a chair that you have to put together, whenever I do that I feel accomplished. I see the chair. I see what I did.



# Schiller Park Update

BY KATE LITTLEFIELD

You may be wondering what is going on in Schiller Park as you see high-vis orange popping out from behind the trees and the whine and revs of power tools from deep in the hills. This winter OEC is putting our chainsaw and species ID skills to use! While winter vegetation management might not be glamorous and identifying plants is a bit trickier without leaves, we have embraced the cold and mud to make some significant strides in getting ahead of our next few seasons.

We have marked out and flagged 1.16 acres and counting of invasive and native species in the forested areas. This will aid us in the spring and summer to perform more accurate removal of invasive species while sparing the native species. Part of this marking and flagging activity involved monitoring. We have monitored approximately 890 square feet of vegetation for invasive species regeneration. Thanks to these two activities we have been able to remove 15,714 square feet of shrubby invasive vegetation and 9 large trees.

With all of this being said, you may wonder why there are still some logs on the slopes. While we have hauled away 40 cubic yards of brush, we are intentionally leaving logs or trees felled onsite. These logs will either be used for erosion control on the steeper areas of the hillsides or left onsite to break down and re-incorporate back into the soil. Some lucky park wildlife may also decide to use them as habitat.

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Top: Logan (Foreman) in the process of felling a Norway maple. We've been removing Norway maples because they are not native and can be considered invasive.  
Middle: Eliad (Crew Leader) using a brush clearing saw to cut down invasive shrubs.  
Bottom: A wooded section of Schiller park above the Bova Center after invasives were cleared. Native understory trees are flagged in orange.





# Schiller Park Update, Cont.

BY KATE LITTLEFIELD

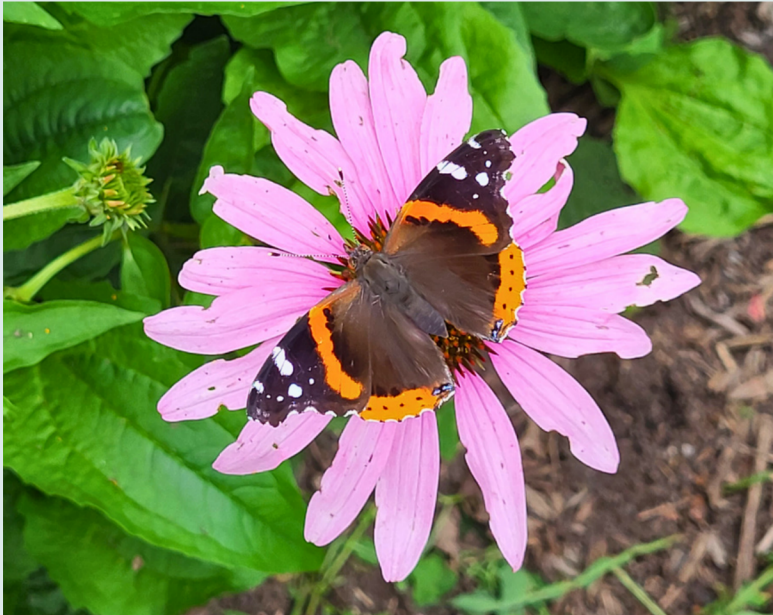
Schiller Park used to have dense, overgrown forested slopes. Until recently the park's forest was primarily dominated by European buckthorn (*Rhamnus cathartica*), a nuisance invasive shrub that we find all across the city. As a matter of fact, European buckthorn makes up approximately 21% of the city of Syracuse's forests. As its numbers increase and the shrubs spread, it pushes out native species that we would otherwise expect to be filling those spaces.

In short, our plan for Schiller Park is to continue removing invasive species through a variety of methods and replant the forests with native trees, shrubs and perennials. This will be a continuous process and will have a variety of appearances throughout the management process. In the long term, we would like to see the forests here return to a structurally- and species-diverse landscape that increases services to the people of Syracuse and the ecosystem of the park.

If you want to get in on the action in Schiller Park, we have great news! In partnership with the City of Syracuse Department of Parks, Recreation, and Youth Programs, OEC is hosting an I Love My Park Day at Schiller Park on Saturday, May 4th. Join us to learn about the history of Schiller Park, the progress we've made there already, and pitch in to clean and care for it. Volunteers will remove invasive shrubs (with handsaws and loppers only -- no power tools, sorry!) and pick up litter. For more information or to register for the event, go to [bit.ly/LoveSchiller](https://bit.ly/LoveSchiller)



OEC Crew and City Forestry Interns working together to meticulously remove small patches of invasive plants from a section of Schiller Park that we've been working in for many years.



Red admiral butterfly on a purple coneflower in the landscaped median on South Townsend, a green infrastructure site.

## Greetings & Goodbye

Hey there, sprout, don't mean to be rude,  
But this garden's not your kind of 'hood.  
Time to uproot, move along, scoot!

Hello, little bud, ready to grow,  
In this garden, you'll put on quite the show.  
Welcome home, let's bloom, take it slow!

BY JAY PORCH

### DID YOU KNOW?

You can donate vehicles to OEC. By donating a vehicle -- perhaps one that you have been meaning to sell or junk for awhile -- you help support the work that OEC does right here in Syracuse. Vehicles do not need to be in working order to donate them. More info at [bit.ly/OEC-Car-Donation](http://bit.ly/OEC-Car-Donation)

### DONATE

For more information, visit [www.onondagaearthcorps.org/donate](http://www.onondagaearthcorps.org/donate)

#### **Fund-A-Truck**

Donate towards our fleet vehicles. Fund-A-Truck goal: \$50,000

#### **Bottle Bonanza**

Redeem your returnables at one of the redemption center partners listed on our website. Or you can drop them off at 160 Brookside Lane, 208 Redfield Ave, 318 Fayette Drive, or 204 Hampton Road on 4/13, 7/13, 9/7, or 10/19 this year.



@OnondagaEarthCorps



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### **ABOUT THE ONONDAGA EARTH CORPS**

When the Eli MacDonald Green Team was restructured in 2005 as the Onondaga Earth Corps (OEC) for local communities, OEC was formed to:

- Help youth understand the relationship between people and the urban ecosystem
- Engage youth in hands-on community and environmental service learning projects
- Train youth for future jobs and careers in environmental fields
- Empower youth by developing their leadership abilities that help them analyze situations, solve problems and implement strategies to improve their communities

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