

---

# OEC NEWSLETTER

---

Official publication of the Onondaga Earth Corps

---

## Tree for a Day

BY SIANNA AVERY



AYA Crew member, Sianna, hugging a tree at Schiller Park

**If I was a tree** I would choose a Golden Falls Redbud. I chose this tree for a few reasons. First off, *Cercis Canadensis* is the first scientific tree name that I learned to pronounce correctly and get it matched up to its common name as well. They are also a native tree. I also like that they have fruits to bear that are tasty to both humans and fantastic for wildlife. At maturity the redbud pods will be 3-4 inches long while the flowers are also edible. You can eat the flowers pickled or raw and the seed pods have a sweet, mild taste. The trees grow up to 8-10 ft. tall while being 3-4 ft. wide, making it a perfect tree to fit into your garden or front yard. They have a beautiful trailing look to them, hence the golden falls, but I do say they remind me of a tropical plant as well. And most people that know me know that I love a good tropical house plant. *Philodendron Hederaceum* or also known as Lemon Lime *Philodendron* is what comes to mind when seeing the beautiful leaves trail down, and both tree and exotic plant have the same bright golden leaves that are heart shaped, both trailing down as they grow. I honestly think I should have both and just call the *Philodendron* my mini golden fall. But I honestly think if I was a tree I'd be the Golden Falls Redbud.

---

### Upcoming Events

---

**4/22 - Community Cleanup**  
209 Elliot Street, 2pm - 4pm

**4/25 Arbor Day Celebration**  
Mundy Branch Library and Elliot Park, 2:30pm - 4:30pm

**5/3 - Community Tree Planting**  
at Grant Village.  
Sign up here: [bit.ly/grantvillage](https://bit.ly/grantvillage)

**5/10 - Community Tree Planting**  
along the Creekwalk  
Sign up here: [bit.ly/creekwalk25](https://bit.ly/creekwalk25)



The gang having a laugh

---

### Thank you to our Sponsors

---

Lewis Cutler, Mimi Satter, C&S Foundation, Patty Weisse Consulting

---

# Why was OEC chainsawing in Schiller Park this Winter?

BY ETHAN CAPUTA

This past winter, you may have noticed the Onondaga Earth Corps (OEC) team operating chainsaws along the lower southern slope of Schiller Park and wondered, "What is going on?"

In January, OEC staff participated in a comprehensive chainsaw safety and rigging training designed to teach the safe and effective use of this essential tool. While valuable on its own, the training was also a necessary step in preparing staff to support the City of Syracuse's ongoing reforestation efforts in Schiller Park.

Since 2020, Schiller Park has been the focus of a five-year revitalization plan led by the City of Syracuse. Once neglected and overrun with invasive vegetation, trash, and encampments, the park has since become a cleaner, safer, and more vibrant space for Syracuse's community. A notable highlight of this transformation occurred on October 19, 2024, when over 100 volunteers came together to plant more than 700 native plants on the northern slope. This effort not only enhanced the beauty of the park but also played a key role in restoring its native ecological biodiversity.

Just a few years ago, the northern slope closely resembled the still-overgrown southern slope, but thanks to the large-scale removal of invasive vegetation, the area was opened up for native plantings to thrive. Armed with our newly acquired chainsaw skills, OEC staff took on the challenge of clearing invasive species on the lower southern slope such as buckthorn and Norway maple that have long dominated the park's landscape.

These aggressive plants form dense thickets and crowd out native species by competing for sunlight, water, and nutrients. By removing them, we're creating space to establish native vegetation such as ash, oaks, ferns, and attract native wildlife, supporting a more balanced and resilient forest ecosystem.

Restoring native habitats isn't just about plants, trees, and wildlife either. It's about people, too. It's about reclaiming green spaces that serve the entire community, creating a safer, greener, and more welcoming park for everyone to enjoy.



AYA Crew Member, Ethan, decked out in PPE, gives a thumbs up during chainsaw training in snowy Schiller Park



---

# A Glimpse of OEC's Life

## Tales, Past and Present, Through the Eyes of Someone Who Has Been Here for 10 Months

BY JULIA SMITH



Onondaga Earth Corps. A local nonprofit organization located in the Near Westside; doing all we can to empower youth, create lasting positive change for our community and the environment, and be a support system to all within our reach.

It would truly be wrong to introduce Onondaga Earth Corps (OEC), without giving you a glimpse of our origin and past;

OEC was originally known as Eli MacDonald's Green Team in 2003, focusing in the South Side Community. However, after gaining rapid popularity, the Green Team was restructured in 2005, with 'Onondaga Earth Corps' being formalized. Eli's mission lives through each crew and staff member each and every day. His unwavering energy and commitment left a lasting impression on everyone fortunate enough to work with him. With his passing in November of 2024, Eli leaves behind a lasting legacy in the Syracuse community through the trees he planted, the lives he touched, and the wisdom he shared.



Top image: Eli MacDonald's Green Team at the Southside Garden circa 2005  
Bottom image: Mr. Eli filling up watering tank at hydrant

# A Glimpse of OEC's Life, Cont.

BY JULIA SMITH

Our mission was, and continues to be, to empower youth to be active participants in creating positive change for themselves, their communities and the environment. But now, 20-some years later, operations look a bit different than where we started.

We have an almost year-round program for both high school youth and young adults aged 18-25. Each season (Spring, Summer, and Fall) consists of about 8-12 weeks for the Young Adult program, and the winter season being almost 12 weeks for our Advanced Young Adults. The youth program follows this rule of thumb similarly; where the ones who show interest, actively continue to work on completing their goals, maintain their attendance and attention towards this program are invited to participate in an 'advanced' winter program. On top of that, we have a staff of 12 full time staff members as well as a full board.

On the 'work' side of things, we have contracts with different public entities. We have contracted work from the City of Syracuse Parks and Recreation Department (CoS Parks); planting hundreds of trees each spring and fall season. A Green Infrastructure (GI) contract from the county; learning about GI, building and maintaining over 20 GI sites (rain gardens, bioswales, etc). A contract with the Syracuse Food Forest Project (SUFFP), where we plant and maintain dozens of public harvestable sites throughout greater Syracuse as an effort to reduce existing food deserts. An immense amount of reoperation and planning goes into all of our work here at OEC to ensure our field crews can go about their days as smoothly as possible.

We also take occasional private and other public contracts, which help support our program's funding towards Personal Development. This includes education and training opportunities for crew members and crew leaders. Personal Development within OEC consists of things like GED practice with SUNY EOC, OSHA classes, Erosion/Sediment Control certification, First Aid/CPR training, and any other training/certification courses our staff and crew might be interested in. Our contracts also include a budget for 'train the trainer' sessions on plant ID practice, reading construction documents, maps, and understanding rain gardens and their purpose in Syracuse. Additionally, field trips are encouraged and loved by all. We have taken crews to Metro Wastewater Treatment Plant, Rand Tract Park, Green Lakes State Park, Lake Ontario, Syracuse Parks Greenhouse, and more!

OEC is continuously building on its roots—supporting youth, improving our environment, and serving the Syracuse community with purpose and care.



OEC team on a field trip at Sterling Nature Center, November 2024

# A Day in the Life - Winter Field Crew

BY JULIA SMITH

Winter season crews almost entirely consist of Tree Pruning crews. Everyone is expected to arrive at the office and have your AIS by 9:00am, just in time for a quick 5 minute debrief of today's plans, crew assignments, and any upcoming news. Breaking up into our crews is streamlined in the winter, as we only have a handful of crew members, known as our Advanced Young Adults (AYAs). Crews typically stay the same for two week periods before we rotate crews and crew leaders.

Pruning crews have scheduled routes, similar to a tree planting route. We are assigned a number of trees ranging between 18-25 trees to prune each day. Lunch is taken in the field, as a way to save time from driving across the city and back. Pruning happens in all weather conditions. As you know, Syracuse Winters are *not* meant for the weak! In previous years, the winters have been moderately mild, making winter work mostly manageable. However Winter 2025 was finally a 'true' winter! We worked in almost two feet of snow for multiple weeks at a time.

When the clock gets close to 4:15pm, all crews begin to pack up their tools for the day before heading back to the office. Taking care of pruning tools in the winter is a bit different than other project areas. Tools must be wiped down to prevent rusting, and are regularly sharpened to prevent tearing/shredding of the bark when pruning. This helps to ensure the tree's health is in tip-top shape at all times. Once all tools are properly taken care of, crew members are able to clean themselves up and be dismissed by their crew leader.

Now to many, the winter season should seem like the 'slowest' season, right? It may seem that way for the field crews too, when in all honesty, winter season can be just the beginning of a long road for the project team! Listed above is a typical Monday - Thursday shift for pruning field crews. This does not include the project team's pre-planning and quick turnaround times while field crews are deployed for the day. The project team begins planning for the spring planting season in January. This planning and active pivoting doesn't seem to stop until the end of May, in which things slow down internally just in time to pick back up again in August. August kicks off the preparation all over again for the fall planting season and doesn't slow down until the end of December!

Now that I've truly bombarded your brains on some of the finer field details of what makes up Onondaga Earth Corps in 2025, it can not go unsaid that every individual here does what they do because we truly want to be here. The magic of OEC does not come from the contracts or the work, but it comes from the heart and passion of the crew itself!

Crew leaders do not simply "*lead a crew*"... but we work with our crews; navigating real life situations of our own *and* own crews. We work as a team to get the job done while having a few laughs along the way. Friendships and partnerships are born from this organization. There's a wide variety of incredibly unique individuals who work here, and I'm personally grateful to be a part of the team!



---

# OEC Youth - Winter Recap

BY TERRANCE T. C.  
VALDES

Onondaga Earth Corps' youth winter season was dynamic and refreshing. Considering programming for the youth crew during the winter season doesn't usually happen, the experience for our youngsters proved to be educational and productive. This past winter was focused on working with our youth crewmembers, developing them personally and professionally. We keyed in on various topics from goal orientedness and public speaking, to tree anatomy and identification, to environmental justice and pollution prevention.



Youth crew member, Trina, pruning oak tree using a pole saw



Youth crew performing air quality testing in the cold

Much of the youth's personal development content during the winter season hinged on Earth Corps' connection with Walter Walker, a local entrepreneur, personal trainer, and motivational speaker. Every week we would have Walt come in to speak to our youth crew with a tailored curriculum on a multitude of topics essential for our folks in their early adulthood. Though he created his lesson plans focused on delivering relevant information for our youth crew, the range of topics discussed would be more than applicable in anyone's life, regardless of age. Walt would utilize his upbeat energy and encouraging spirit to deliver content focused on decision making, planning, organization, organization, and self awareness in a digestible form for our youth. This helped keep them engaged and prepared them to apply what they learned in practical situations.

Another benefit of our relationship with Walter Walker came from his experience as a personal trainer. Our youth crew were able to experience customized fitness sessions where he would regularly push their limits and exclaim "You're in my world now!" These workouts were great to expose our youth crew to the importance of physical health and developing a routine in this arena. But the key takeaway from these sessions was the significance of mindset in overcoming obstacles, physical or otherwise.

# OEC Youth - Winter Recap Cont.

BY TERRANCE T. C. VALDES



Outside of our personal development progress, the youth crew were also able to gain valuable knowledge and experience in tree care. We had the opportunity to teach our youth crew about how trees function, how to identify different parts of the tree, and how to identify some of more common types of trees. After laying this foundation of preliminary understanding of our work area, we were able to focus on specific application of pruning practices and procedures. The youth crew were able to gain a working grasp on tree anatomy and an introductory level experience in pruning young trees.

A significant portion of our youth winter season was spent in collaboration with Amy Samuels from Onondaga Environmental Institute. Our work mainly consisted of preparing the youth to be facilitators of workshops focused on educating the public on the topic of air pollution. The youth crew learned the history of environmental justice as a general topic and how it pertains to our own local communities with the advent of a coming community grid and the tear down of I-81. They became knowledgeable on different topics like particulate matter pollution, and air quality monitoring. Our winter season programming prepared them to deliver these topics to specific audiences in the relevant area affected by the I-81 viaduct project. The youth crew gained an understanding of the subject matter of air quality with some practice in public speaking and increasing public awareness on harmful effects of air pollution.

Overall, the youth crew winter season proved to be a uniquely challenging, yet ultimately fulfilling experience to have been a part of. As a former youth crewmember it's been an almost surreal experience to see certain characteristics in my team, I now know my crew leaders saw in me. As a crew leader it is a gratitude inducing moment when a youth crew member displays those all too familiar flashes of potential. I have to accept the task of nurturing these sparks of brilliance into the fully fledged fires I know they can become. Which is simultaneously a burden and a privilege. I look forward to continuing in helping to develop these young people for their futures, whether they be in the green industry or not. I'm excited to see what we can accomplish in this upcoming season and beyond.



Youth crew member, Mozi, looks into microscope during air quality workshop with Amy Samuels



---

# Welcome New Staff!



**CHELSEA CHAPMAN -  
YOUNG ADULT CREW  
LEADER**

Chelsea Chapman joined OEC as a Crew Leader for the spring season! She comes to OEC from northern Maine where she worked as an Operations Forester for Seven Islands Land Company (7I). Chelsea originally comes from a background in IT Project Management and Operations, but decided to make a career change in 2023, when she attended the SUNY-ESF Ranger School and obtained her A.A.S. in Forest Technology. Chelsea is really excited to be part of OEC and learn about urban forestry with the crews.



**EH "MOEMO" QUI -  
YOUNG ADULT CREW  
LEADER**

Moemo Qui's passion for environmental service and community outreach led him to Onondaga Earth Corps, where he interned through Mercy Works in 2021. His dedication to making a difference in his community was evident as he progressed from a crew member to a crew leader. At OEC, he worked on improving his leadership skills and confidence. He then worked for Landscape East and later as a NYC Forester in New York City. He returns to Syracuse and is back with OEC, reaffirming his commitment to serving the community.





OEC crew and staff with Communitree Stewards from Cornell Cooperative Extension

## Pruning at First Ward Cemetery

BY KATHERINE HALLINAN

At the end of the winter season, OEC held an all-staff pruning day at First Ward Cemetery. All staff members and our Advanced Young Adult Crew pitched in to check in on recently planted trees in the park. In the afternoon, we were joined by a group of Communitree Stewards from Cornell Cooperative Extension of Onondaga County. These dedicated and skilled volunteers helped us get a total of 72 trees pruned in just one day!

Our Advanced Young Adult crew members got a chance to exercise their public speaking skills, leading introductions and an overview at the beginning of the event. Everyone enjoyed the sunny, warm weather and the opportunity to connect with the community while learning about a historic site.

### DONATE

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

#### Fund-A-Truck

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

#### Bottle Bonanza

Redeem your returnables at one of our redemption center partners: Express Bottle Return, F-M Returnables, Papa Cans and Bottle Return. Bottle and Can Retrieval. Ask them to deposit the \$ to the Onondaga Earth Corps Account.



@EarthCorps



[www.onondagaeearthcorps.org](http://www.onondagaeearthcorps.org)  
(315) 565- 3797  
[info@onondagaeearthcorps.org](mailto:info@onondagaeearthcorps.org)

**Onondaga Earth Corps**  
490 West Onondaga Street  
Syracuse, NY 13202

### 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

[@onondagaeearthcorps](https://www.instagram.com/onondagaeearthcorps)



[/onondagaeearthcorps](https://www.linkedin.com/company/onondagaeearthcorps)



[/onondagaeearthcorps](https://www.facebook.com/onondagaeearthcorps)

