

Fayetteville High School's Oak Trees Are Gone, but a Fight Is Just Beginning

Groups like Make Fayetteville Liveable are continuing a decades-long fight for better infrastructure and quality of life—and its impacts can already be seen.

By: Kacey Frederick

On the windy day of Nov. 24, 2024, locals gathered outside the Fayetteville High School to celebrate seven post oak trees the city government is looking to tear down to make way for a parking lot. The trees in question are over a hundred years old, and mark the last green space the high school has to offer in the midst of sprawling parking pavement.

The event was hosted by Make Fayetteville Liveable: a group working to promote development and progress in city planning. In addition to food provided by local community kitchen MayDay NWA and vegan bakery Garden Pastries, several musical artists from Northwest Arkansas were present, including Still on the Hill, Rain Rues, Charcoal Roach, and Blue Brasher.

In solidarity with other local advocacy groups, there were tables set up for Ozark Circle for Choice, which helps those seeking reproductive healthcare to find resources, and the Arkansas Justice Reform Coalition, an organization working to combat mass incarceration in the state.

Colleen Hill, an organizer with MFL, greeted attendees as volunteers were busy behind her. Some were decorating trees, while others worked on building a mulch path across the field.

A Mission for Improvement

MFL's ultimate goal is to bring together everyone who wishes to see advancements in their community, and empowering them to make their voices heard. It started as a small Instagram account created by Yannik Dwyer, in response to the city council decision to tear down the trees.

“These trees were already under protection,” said Dwyer before the crowd. “They were under protection legally. They had been put under protection just in 2011, not that long ago, by the school itself—a protection that was supposed to be in perpetuity.”

Indeed, the meeting in which Dwyer referred to saw the removal of an easement that would protect the trees, despite a crowd of dissenters across all ages voicing their opposition.

Though the vote was five to three, Mayor Lioneld Jordan made a statement sharing he would vote in favor of the trees being torn down if it came to a tie. Looking back now, after his recent loss in the mayoral race, his inaction on this issue may have had an impact on how many voted—especially those who are most politically involved. It certainly affected this crowd.

Carrying a Torch

Northwest Arkansas has a long history of its residents fighting to protect nature in the Natural State. Kelly and Donna Mulhollan of Still on the Hill shared the story of Mary Lightheart, who in 2000, at the age of 53, spent three weeks living at the top of a tree the city was looking to tear down.

“Very exciting time in our town, and kind of transformative,” shared Kelly. “That’s when Mayor Coody took over from Fred Hanna, and we took a turn for the more progressive side—and things are going a lot better than they were back then. So, it just shows you how important these things can be.”

Seated in the front row that day was Lightheart herself: now 78 years old, but still full of fight as ever, and ready to climb another tree.

“I just want you guys to know that before the council vote, I said, ‘I’ll go up there, if you’ll just get me in there!’” shared Lightheart with the crowd. “But they said, ‘At 78 years old, Mary, you’re too old. We’re not doing it again.’ But I did try!”

In honor of Lightheart, the Mulhollans played a song that was recorded years ago, containing lyrics Lightheart wrote over 24 years ago while camping in that tree.

“Laughter will linger, clarity will come; Purpose will be perceived, value will venture forth, and strength will grow; These things, I know; I’ve seen them happen; From the view top of a mighty oak, and the screeching of a soaring heart through the rustle of the dancing leaves, my spirit spoke,” the song sang.

Lightheart’s story speaks to a larger truth about Fayetteville and the region surrounding it. It holds a bustling history of independent thinkers, across all ages and demographics, who are dedicated to seeking change and improvement.

To some, these century-old oak trees may not mean much. But for MFL and so many Fayetteville natives, their removal represents the city’s natural beauty being destroyed as a result of unimaginative city planning methods.

The trees have since been removed as of this January, leaving what MFL described on social media as an “eery void ... vacant of life and meaning.” It was to be expected, though; and the group is urging more locals to practice awareness of what decisions are being made about their city.

“This is an open space—an open space that the school and the city has completely neglected. There are no paths here. There's a single bench here. They don't do any educational activities out here,” said Dwyer. “It's the last large green space. We cannot allow them to continue to neglect this. We cannot allow them to hide behind their false vision of responsibility. So we need to force them to be responsible. We need to take this city back.”