

Local club plants trees at OHS, other schools to help fight climate crisis

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As the climate crisis expands globally, a community effort has been put together to fight back. Hill Country Roots looks to plant trees all around the city and county in order to reduce carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere. Their current project is at OHS, where they plan to plant native trees according to club member Ann Phillippi.

"I think our meetings began in October when we didn't even have a name yet, but it quickly began to be clear that we all agree that tree planting was going to be a very important mission for our group—it was quickly clear that the tree planting would be a major emphasis and especially in light of the fact that Oxford and all of North Mississippi is clear cutting native forests daily," Phillippi said. "Our worst examples are in Oxford where developers are given free reign to clear cut before they build, so planting trees to replace what we are losing is an admirable and lofty goal. We exceed the need throughout all of our county but see Oxford High School campus as a perfect place for a pilot project to see how we're going to succeed."

Grounds supervisor Jamie Cregar decides where the trees and which trees will be planted. According to Phillippi, people can donate \$70 for native trees and \$40 for fruit trees. Many parts of the community have already begun to take part, whether it be five or six year olds, college students or retired members, according to club member Tim Dolan.

"We've got students, professors from Ole Miss. We've got people in the community. We've got people from the Oxford Tree Board. Some school children," Dolan said. "We'd like to partner with more, so we're really interested in educating the public and getting property owners and businesses and getting lots of people involved and just getting excited about having more trees and planting more trees and make it an educational process."

Among its first members is OMS student Hank Dolan, who is in charge of the technological side of the project. He currently runs their Facebook page and has set up a GoFundMe. He wants to make a page for the club further down the road in order to better spread the word and give out information.

The climate problem first struck him in the fourth grade during the 2016 presidential elections when climate was brought up during debates.

"I'm always worried about climate change, and trees are a good way of bringing [down] carbon dioxide," Hank Dolan said. "I want to fight back against that because that's the thing that needs to be taken care of right now, and there's not a lot being done against it."

According to Phillippi, Hank Dolan would actually be able to see the fruits of this project since he will be attending OHS soon, and he sees that the community will benefit from this as well.

"I really wanna gain like that I work with climate," Hank Dolan said. "This may be a bit more personal, but let's say I'm applying for a job and I wanted to try to help out with a company trying to program things for climate change, and I'd say like, 'I worked with the Hill Country Roots for six years planting trees in a small town in Mississippi,' I mean that could be good for me, but I really want Oxford to have more trees and things to look better with more trees, and I'm not sure how much a dent it would put in climate change, but it's still a dent nonetheless."

Phillippi says that there is currently a threat of clear cutting and a current member, Deanna Kresiel, is working on a petition to fight back against that. After the OHS project, Phillippi says Hill Country Roots will be working on planting trees in Lafayette schools and other places in the community.

"I mentioned at our meeting about the prospect of maybe moving to Lafayette schools as soon as we finished Oxford High School campus," Phillippi said. "There was a consensus that would be a nice second project, so I think we're trying to be super realistic, and so, we're going to finish one project before we move on to the next, and once we get that momentum going, we can expand our geographic coverage."

Hank Dolan says he has seen many more people partake in this effort than he would have expected to. Word is spreading quickly according to Phillippi, and she says Hill Country Roots is not going anywhere.

"We have three projects going very well with commitment, very intelligent, dedicated people, and this is not a fly by night organization. We are

a group of I think there are 60 people now that are committed to doing good for our tiny little piece of the planet," Phillippi said. "I believe that nobody is just approaching this with anything else than utmost sincerity and dedication to a goal of making the world a better place, and our world is here. We're here to stay. Hill Country Roots is here to stay."

Mia Kaup, an Ole Miss graduate student, leads the group meetings. According to Phillippi, Phillippi was the first one to speak up about wanting to plant trees, but there is no leader for their group. She says it is a community effort and encourages everyone to partake in it.

"People are alarmed by the removal of trees in our community, and also, they're alarmed by the global climate crisis that we're in, and our community is comprised of very educated, thoughtful people, and most people know that trees might be able to get us out of this tragedy that we're currently on the road to, so we can act individually or we can act as a community," Phillippi said. "In this effort, the answer is both, individuals can help and collectively, the whole community can help."

Superintendent Brian Harvey believes that it is important that we take care of our planet and give back to it.

"I think anything that we can do, and I'm a firm believer that we have to take care of what's been given to us," Harvey said. "That is our Earth and that means recycling, it means planting trees, it means being cognizant of what can happen if we don't manage what's been given to us."

Harvey believes that this effort will bring many benefits to the OHS campus, including lower temperatures, a more beautiful campus, a reduction in runoff, a canopy around the school and a bigger push in our community to work together.

"I think it's a way that we can get students and community members involved and working towards something that's positive," Harvey said. "So many times there are, you know we're hit with so many negative things with what's not going right, and I think it's an opportunity for us to say, 'Hey, here are some things that are going right.' People are willing to help and be positive forces in society."



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Left: Co-chair of the Oxford Tree Board Cowan Hunter demonstrates how to plant a tree at a workshop. The workshop took place on Feb. 16, 2020. **Top middle:** Ann Phillippi proudly holds her tree. **Bottom middle:** Ole Miss graduate student Maya Kaup leads Hill Country Oaks before they get ready to plant trees. **Right:** Club member Frankie Wilson and her two children happily hold their free trees. Each person who went to the workshop received a free tree to plant in their own yard.

