

Park volunteers say rehab work going to the dogs

By **Kia Gregory**, Philadelphia Inquirer Staff Writer

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The first victim was a lacebark elm.

John Neugebauer was stopped by its mauled bark early one June morning during his walk through the lush park across from his Frankford home.

Weeks later, about half the baby trees throughout Overington Park's four acres have broken branches and stripped bark. And the big cherry tree near the entrance stands wounded, ripped open, bleeding sap, dying.

Since the weather turned warm, Neugebauer, his wife, Diane Kunze, and their neighbors have grown frustrated that the park they worked hard to turn from wasteland to oasis is under siege. They believe that one of their own has been using the greenery

as a fight camp for pit bulls.

"It's kind of disheartening," said Kunze, head of the park association, while chatting with neighbors near the slide.

"You put in years of work to bring the park up, and one guy can destroy it in a summer."

Overington Park, at 1300 Orthodox St., used to be "a mess," said 40-year resident Lorraine Fortino.

Broken glass littered the play area. Homeless people slept on benches. Hollow-eyed prostitutes trolled the pathways. "And the drugs," said Kunze, 53, affable but no-nonsense. "It was a heavy drug area."

Kunze, an art teacher who has lived in the community for almost two decades and is a self-described fanatic gardener at home, felt the park "cried out for help."

In the six years since she founded Friends of Overington Park, the group has created colorful beds of perennials, sunflowers, and cannas. In just the last year and a half, it also planted 28 trees - cherry, hawthorn, yellowwood, chestnut, sugar maple - through public and private partnerships and with community volunteers.

The gardeners' toil gave the park a higher purpose.

Now toddlers take recess in the shade. Elementary schoolers conduct field trips. People visit for soccer games, football practices, picnics, walks, or just to sit and read. There are fall festivals over dried leaves and pumpkin patches, and workshops on seed planting and pruning.

"It seems the prettier the park is, the more regular people want to come in," Kunze said. "And the prostitutes and drug addicts leave because they don't want their business in front of everybody."

"I don't understand why someone wants to come and destroy it."

The neighbors believe they know the culprit: a big guy in his 20s who sits on a bench with two minions and the three pit bulls they allow to roam and sometimes spar.

They've seen him lower branches for the dogs to chomp down on and dangle like ornaments. Or take a branch in hand and swing one of the dogs around by its teeth.

"That's to strengthen his jaws," Neugebauer said, "to rip another dog's throat out."

Although no one has seen any tree butchering firsthand, the gardeners are convinced that the big guy is responsible.



Diane Kunze and John Neugebauer join neighbors and members of Kunze's garden club at Overington Park in Frankford. "I don't understand why someone wants to come and destroy it," Kunze says.

Neugebauer, 54, a college recruiter, graying and lean with a self-effacing grin, confronted the man, who, he said, denied any wrongdoing.

When police arrived, said Kunze, "they told us if they don't see it, there's nothing they can do."

Fifteenth District Lt. Anthony McFadden said residents should call 911 if they saw dogs "acting violently." Otherwise, they should enlist the Pennsylvania SPCA to investigate.

Neighbors have since reached out to State Rep. Tony Payton Jr. The 29-year-old Democrat - in a blue-collar district of faded factories, encroaching development, and an undercurrent of poverty, drugs, and crime - plans to send the man a letter and hopes to meet with him in the coming weeks.

"I don't want there to be any kind of shouting match between neighbors," Payton said.

"Everybody wants to live in a neighborhood that's peaceful and nice. Once he realizes he's not contributing to that basic want, I think we can find a way to resolve it."

Until then, those who helped transform the park feel foiled by its unraveling.

The group has pruned willowy branches. And after Kunze read up on tree care, she got Neugebauer to carve out the damage in the cherry tree's thick bark, into a canoe shape, to help it survive. The hope was for the sap to create a protective barrier, like a scab.

"It's heartbreaking," said lizard-tattooed James Andel, 37, standing under the tree's shade. A glass engraver, Andel joined the garden club a few months ago as a way to reduce his carbon footprint. "There's nothing you can do about that tree now. It's dying."

For the younger, smaller trees, Neugebauer coated the scratches and bites with "tree-healing paint."

On one of his walks, he noticed "they just chewed under the damaged parts. They chewed that one to death," he said, pointing to a sawed-off cherry tree.

The park, once beautiful and lively, has become a trauma ward for wounded trees.

"We're not just doing all this planting. We're thinking about the future," said Susan Slawson, the city's recreation commissioner, whose department deploys a maintenance worker to help care for the park. "It's unfortunate that some people don't understand the value. But what's wonderful about this is the community members have decided that they are going to continue to fight for their park."

Neighbors considered putting fencing around the trees, but Neugebauer predicted "a scrap-metal guy would have these fences out in a day."

He reasoned about the vandal's motive: "I have to think you don't want the neighborhood to be better," he said. "You want people to be scared of you, and scared to come into the park."

Near what Kunze called the "drug bench" lay damning evidence - drug packets, one with traces of a white powder, and a blunt wrapper.

If anything, the threat has united the park lovers and expanded their network.

Kunze's band of neighbors is working with the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society to create fliers and host community meetings to build awareness of dog fighting.

They anxiously await Payton's meeting, perhaps a last-ditch effort, and plan to work with his office to get a police security camera.

They are also documenting the tree damage and the fear they see creeping back.

That sticky afternoon, Lisa Handy watched as her curly-haired 3-year-old daughter took turns on the slide with a friend.

Handy used to bring her every day. "Now I can't count on coming to the park," she said. "If there's dogs, we keep walking, and I tell her we're going to the store. If there's no dogs, we're going to the park - surprise!"

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