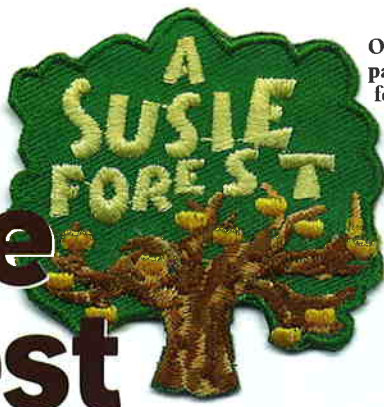


The Susie Forest



Official Girl Scouts patch for the Susie forest plantings.

By Nancy McKerrow

March 21, 2002, changed my life; tragically for the worst, but surprisingly for the better. On that day, as my daughter Susie Stephens, a bicycle and pedestrian safety advocate, crossed a street in St. Louis, Missouri, at a crosswalk with a “walk” light, she was hit by a tour bus and killed. Her untimely death at the age of 36 devastated her family and her many circles of friends and colleagues.

Susie loved the outdoors—she biked, hiked, climbed, and cross-country skied. At the time of her death, she was consulting on alternative transportation issues, as well as working in Winthrop, WA, for the Methow Conservancy, an advocacy group working to maintain the natural environment of the beautiful Methow Valley.

During this time, another family, who had experienced the death of their young bicyclist son, suggested I plant a tree for Susie because they had found solace in a tree planted at their son’s middle school. I took their advice and decided to plant a tree in Spokane, Washington’s Japanese Garden after recalling how Susie’s trips to Japan as a teenager put her life on the path toward further appreciating and understanding the environment.

The idea to plant a tree, however, was put on hold until I met Jim Flott, an Urban Forester from Spokane, who told me that if I donated three trees I could put Susie’s name in City Hall. My “Here-I-Am!” girl (also called the “Bicycle Advocacy Goddess”) would have liked that, I thought.

While making plans with the Parks Department, I found that Spokane’s street trees were decimated by an ice storm in 1996, and a program called “Reforest Spokane” had been created to replace as many as possible. We decided to give the program a push by making the first Susie tree planting a street tree and inviting city officials, candidates for office, and members of the local media. There was a large crowd and it was a very exciting day for me.

The second tree was planted in the Japanese Garden, and the third was a tree for Grace Susie Bain, the stillborn daughter of good friends of Susie’s.

I realize now that if I had planted just one tree then there would never have been a Susie Forest. The involvement of the public, working to solve a problem by planting the first tree, the personal joy I felt when planting the second tree for the love of Susie, and planting the third

tree as a gift to help a family with their loss, showed me the power of trees. At each of these plantings I could literally feel Susie’s approval. I was hooked, and told

the parks employee that I wanted to keep planting Susie trees.

“No you don’t,” she said.

I gasped. “What?”

“You want to plant a Susie Forest.”

“Yes!” I quickly agreed, and the seeds of the Susie Forest were planted.

The Susie Forest is a way to connect people to trees, and so in addition to each of the trees I plant on Susie’s birthday and the anniversary of her death, I make each tree important to someone or some group. One of my favorite programs is *Read for Trees*, which Jim Flott created for the Spokane Public Library. The original concept called for children to read and place a leaf on a paper tree in the library, followed by the children then planting a real tree in a park. I enhanced the program so that the children participated by reading and voting for one of two trees which would be planted on library grounds. We began the contest with a program about trees featuring the city arborist. There was good participation and the children earned the opportunity to watch the tree grow.

I have also extended the program to include the Boys and Girls Club, Mobius Children’s Museum, and the Girl Scouts. The Inland Empire Girl Scout Council now even has a patch called A Susie Forest, which is based on the remembrance of Susie, a former scout. Last year, one troop sold enough cookies to plant a Susie tree in the local arboretum, and all 12 girls earned the Susie patch. Last year I also began the program in the public schools, where children who complete a summer reading program get to vote for a tree that is to be planted at their school.

I work to connect people to trees in Spokane; I have planted trees as wedding presents, for families who have lost loved ones, for my friends and family, for the wonderful bike rides Susie would have loved to have been along, and for students who have worked on tree planting projects locally. I have planted trees for foreign visitors with Friendship Force (in Spokane’s Friendship Park), for conventioners from the Neighborhoods USA meeting, to honor pedestrian casualties, and to thank the symphony.

The Susie Forest includes several trees I have helped others plant. These include trees honoring lost loved ones, my auto repair shop, my neighborhood council that raises money every year to have a tree planting party, a family who moved here and wanted their far-flung family members to know that they have roots in Spokane, and I have also helped plant a tree for the 90th birthday celebration of a man who wanted no presents.

This became an international project after the tsunami in southeast Asia. Susie had studied and taught in Thailand and I knew she would want me to help, so I gave to a Heifer International planting project there. I have continued donating to their tree planting programs ever since. Now there are also Susie trees in Cambodia, Laos, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, Albania, and Zimbabwe.



Tree planting in Tehran, Iran.

The Susie Forest (continued)

A young Iranian married couple began an around-the-world bike trip promoting peace and environmentalism by planting peace trees. In Spokane, they planted a tree and wanted it to be a part of the Susie Forest.

Across the United States, Susie Campbell, my college roommate, planted a tree in Independence, VA, and Susie's childhood friend Gael Whalen planted a tree in Lakewood, WA. My cousin Rick Arendt named a tree for her in Loretto, KY.

I signed up with Friendship Force for travel to Australia and New Zealand. We stayed in Adelaide, South Australia, where Susie had led a workshop at an international bike convention and where she began a six-month bicycle tour up the east coast of Australia. I wanted to plant trees there, and through Jim Flott, I contacted Australian arborist Craig Hallam, who in turn put me in contact with the arboretum at the University of Adelaide. There is now a Susie tree there. Bicyclists in New Zealand were a wonderful help, and now there are three Susie trees in a park in Hamilton.

Once I began planting trees overseas I didn't want to stop. There is a tree in a churchyard in Ottershaw, England, and one along a bike path on Vancouver Island in Canada. A group from Spokane traveled to Iran, and now there is a Susie peace tree in a park in the capital city of Tehran. There will be more.

Over the years, a ceremony has developed at the tree plantings. I begin by introducing Susie to those who didn't know her. I show pictures: Susie on top of Mt. Fuji in Japan, when she was attending college, Susie riding a bike while teaching English in Japan, Susie arriving in California on a bike trip from Seattle to San Francisco, Susie climbing a mountain in the Cascades. I also show a picture of the plaque on the Methow Recycling Center which reads: "Dedicated to Susie Stephens 4/16/65 - 3/21/02 whose work and joyful enthusiasm moved people to positive action."

I also present maps of Spokane, Washington; the United States; and the world; all with markings on them of where various Susie trees have been planted.

As the ceremony continues, we write down and then hang what we call tree-grams. The idea behind this act is to write down our thoughts on biodegradable strips of paper, which will then become part of the tree as it grows. We've also found that vandals have a tendency to leave these trees alone, realizing they are special in some way.

At the end of the ceremony, after a little bit of shoveling and dirt, we celebrate with some freshly baked cookies. Spokane city arborist Jeff Perry says that if I don't bake and bring peppernuts, he will dig up the tree, put it on the truck, and take it back to the nursery. There are always cookies.

I have started a fund at Inland Northwest Community Foundation so I can continue to plant trees even after my own death. And there will be cookies—I've provided the Foundation with my recipe so that they will continue taking cookies to each planting.



Tree planting at Waite Arboretum at the University of Adelaide (Australia).

The good that has come after Susie's death is that I have found a purpose and joy in life even without her. I feel her presence at every tree planting, and she lives on in this good work.

To everyone: Plant a Susie tree!

If you are interested in planting a Susie Tree, or are interested in more information about this ongoing project, please e-mail the author (TheSusieForest@hotmail.com).

Nancy McKerrow retired from the Spokane Public Library shortly after Susie's death in 2002. She has since coordinated projects with pedestrian and bicycle advocacy groups as well as people in the city of Spokane, WA.

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