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Jim Gersbach

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Jim Gersbach currently works as a public affairs specialist at the Oregon Department of Forestry. He works to share the work of the agency and guides the agency regarding Oregon's forest management and regulations. He received his Bachelor of Arts in Journalism from the University of Oregon. He has prior experience in communications and media relations and has worked as an urban forestry specialist for the City of Portland. In 2005 he created the Ainsworth Linear Arboretum, a linear arboretum in Ainsworth Street in Portland, Oregon. With the help of the community, through this arboretum he has successfully helped create an accessible space to share different species of plants. Jim Gersbach also volunteers at the Hoyt Arboretum and for the organization Friends of Trees.

Please tell us about your life and trajectory towards working at the Oregon Department of Forestry.

Part of my childhood was spent in Eastern Washington in Steppe Sagebrush Country. We'd find petrified wood everywhere on the ground. I was fascinated to think that long ago our ranch had seen the most amazing forest rich with ginkgos and dawn redwoods, and marvelous prehistoric mammals. What had happened to them? Why had they vanished and been replaced by the treeless desert all around me?

So from an early age I was curious about ecological change, climate shifts and extinctions. As an adult I devoured more about those topics and became more aware that deforestation, extinctions and climate shifts weren't just things that had happened long ago – they were happening now and at an alarmingly fast pace. Coming from a desert to the lush side of the Pacific Northwest, it was astounding to observe that the tallest, most massive old-growth forests in the world had been all but eliminated – not in a distant tropical rainforest but here and within living memory of people in my own family.

When a position became open with the Oregon

Department of Forestry to communicate the work of the agency's forest scientists and urban forestry team among other duties, it was a great fit. I had worked for a few years in urban forestry in Portland and was familiar with the issues and challenges, both as a staffer and citizen volunteer.

How did you learn about GLH and why was it important to you?

I learned about Green Legacy Hiroshima in September 2018 through Mike Oxendine, a fellow board member of Oregon Community Trees. He had germinated a number of seeds from Hiroshima survivor trees and was seeking help finding homes for them. When I was still in grade school I had read John Hersey's book on the atom bombing of Hiroshima and it left a lasting impression. I grew up during the Cold War and the threat of atomic annihilation was a very real possibility. Sadly, even as I write this we see a nuclear-armed country massing troops on the border of a neighboring country and threatening to invade. So the temptations to war have not gone away. When I was finally able to visit Hiroshima as an adult and walk in the very places where such unimaginable destruction had occurred, I was profoundly affected as I'm sure most

visitors are. Seeing the survivor trees was incredibly moving. How had they lived after everything around them was obliterated? A miracle. So when Mike showed us all those young seedlings grown from those trees and eager to find new homes, I knew instantly I had to help. Together with Kristin Ramstad from Oregon Department of Forestry we were determined to offer the trees to Tree City USA communities and Tree Campus USA schools in Oregon first, and then to any community or entity willing to plant them in public places in accordance with GLH requirements.

What has the impact been of planting atomic survivor trees in Oregon and what has the community's response been towards it?

Oregon might seem far removed from Hiroshima but we were the only state in the U.S. mainland to suffer civilian casualties during World War II. Just a few months before the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, a Japanese balloon bomb exploded in central Oregon killing young people going on a picnic. So it seems especially fitting that the desire for peace and reconciliation coming from Hiroshima should be received warmly by people in Oregon. We were not sure if it would be difficult to get

communities interested in planting these trees. We mentioned in the outreach that the 75th anniversary of the atom bombing of Hiroshima and the end of World War II was coming up in 2020. That would be a most appropriate time to commemorate those events and also honor the 75 years of peace that has prevailed since the end of that terrible war by planting a peace tree. Gratifyingly, that really resonated with people. There was incredible interest in the trees. It came from schools, colleges, universities, churches, cemeteries, arboretums, parks and city governments in towns large and small, and from every part of the state. The message of resilience and hope in the face of tragedy that the trees represented to Dr. Hideko Tamura-Snyder was understood. A community college wanted to plant one on the spot where a terrible mass shooting had occurred. Another community where people of Japanese descent had been forcibly uprooted and taken to camps during the war planted the peace trees in the Japanese section of the local graveyard. Schools or cities with exchange programs or sister-city relationships with Japan wanted the trees to deepen their connections. Others saw it as a way to remind their community how even bitter enemies can overcome the divisions and grief of war to mutually embrace peace as the best path forward. The

COVID pandemic hit just as plantings were starting and public ceremonies had to be canceled or postponed. Then on Labor Day 2020 Oregon saw the worst wildfires in living memory devastate more than a million acres and destroy large swathes of several communities. Talent was scheduled to plant two peace trees in October 2020. The neighborhood across from the park where the trees were planted was obliterated by the inferno, as was a large part of the town. As residents gathered to plant the trees, Talent looked eerily like photos of Hiroshima in the aftermath of the atom bomb. Dr. Tamura-Snider shared how to the people of Hiroshima the blackened and battered trees coming back to life had been a sign of hope. That message took on immediate and important meaning to the people of Talent, who were still reeling from their terrible tragedy. I think it showed the peace trees message is universal, although its significance may take on added meaning in different places at different times. We all suffer, we all must somehow try to go on. The trees suggest that the way forward from tragedy is to work for peace in your own life, your own community and in our shared world.

How important is creating awareness about biodiversity and climate change? How do we work to spread awareness further around the globe?

Although the impacts vary, every single person on the planet is or soon will experience the effects of climate change and the loss of biodiversity. Super storms, megafires, intense droughts, massive die offs of wildlife, have intruded into people's awareness. It's now less about raising awareness as about helping people find effective ways to make changes that will reduce our carbon footprint and wasteful use of finite natural resources. People will always need to eat, have shelter and stay warm or cool. Helping find ways for us to do that which cause less harm is key. Where someone has figured out how to meet a human need that's more friendly to the planet, we need to share that innovation widely and encourage its adoption or adaptation

so it becomes all our success. Most people didn't independently learn to tame fire or invent the wheel. But once someone else did, the rest of humanity quickly learned. The same will be true for learning not just to live with less impact on the planet but live better on the planet and with each other.

In your experience how have plants and nature transcended beyond cultural barriers and knowledge gaps, especially with those not in fields related to science?

You don't need to know how to read or write or even speak a language to relate to the natural world. Plants, especially trees, affect us in so many positive ways we're not even aware of, calming us, lowering our blood pressure, helping us focus and pay attention, even helping us heal faster. Every sense can be engaged – seeing marvelous fall color, smelling flowers, hearing the wind rustle leaves, or running your hand over different barks, from rough, ridged kinds to smooth, sensuous ones. Like us, trees are living beings. As living beings we can relate to the life cycle we share with trees - birth, growth, maturity, reproduction and on into old age and death. I always try to help people learn to identify at least a few common trees. When you know the name of a tree, its origin and life history, what role it plays in the urban forest, it makes it familiar and something we can start to care about, the way the face of a



Jim Gersbach at the peace tree planting in Chuck Roberts Park-Talent, Oregon



Jim Gersbach(right) with Dr. Tamura-Snider and Michael Oxendine.

person we know stands out in a crowd.

You created the Ainsworth Linear Arboretum in Portland. Please tell us about why you created it and how it has been sustained till now.

As a long-time guide at Portland's city-owned arboretum (Hoyt Arboretum) I knew our city's mild climate could support hundreds of different tree species. And yet about 90 percent of our street trees were from just 10 genera – predominantly maples and short-lived trees like flowering plums, pears, and crabapples. Even though more choices were being allowed, many people were still choosing only what was familiar. Exposing them to great new options wasn't easy because the established arboretum was hard to find and inconvenient to most people. So I convinced the City's Urban Forestry Commission in 2005 to designate a stretch of Ainsworth in Northeast Portland as an investigational arboretum. This gave us permission to plant promising new species of trees in an actual street setting.

Ainsworth was perfect. It was flat, had wheelchair accessible sidewalks, was served by public transit and was easy for people to find. It had wide planting strips on both sides – one with power lines and one without – and a broad median running down the middle for 1.5 miles. The trees in the median

were mostly Norway maples. These were starting to die from old age and had proven to be an invasive species that the City no longer wanted planted.

Earlier attempts to diversify relied on just 3 species - Raywood ash that were lovely but tended to fall over in storms; thin-barked European beech, of which 80 percent died from drought or sunscald; and northern red oaks, which did well but were only one type of oak among scores suitable for Portland's climate.

As trees died we began replacing them with diverse species and new cultivars with better forms or disease resistance. Over 16 years we've seen diversity in the median planting area grow six fold, from only 4 genera to 28. The number of species has increased from just six to 47. There were no evergreen species, conifers or native trees, and now there are.

Many people and organizations have helped with this project. Nurseries and the non-profit Friends of Trees as well as Portland Parks and Recreation's Urban Forestry staff provided trees. The Parks folks have also removed dead trees, ground the stumps to enable new plantings and watered young trees for two summers. Because Portland has experienced multiple drought years, I have also hand-watered a lot of the trees beyond two years to help them establish well. This spring with the help of neighborhood volunteers (shout out to the Concordia Tree Team!) we're launching an online website documenting all the trees with photos and descriptions to allow self-guided tours, fulfilling the Linear Arboretum's educational mission. It shows ordinary people can take what science is telling us and apply it to improving our communities through persistent efforts.