

2015 TEEA Winner Civic/Community Category: TreeFolks

Jim Rooni, Texas A&M Forest Service

Labor Day weekend 2011, the wildfires started north of here, a down power line, and moved very quickly southward.

The Honorable Paul Pape, Bastrop County Judge

It's characterized as the worst fire in Texas history, as relates to urban interface. The recovery has been a challenge, and we've worked hard to not only put out the fire, but begin to recover from the effects of the fire, and rebuild the infrastructure and rebuild our community.

Jim Rooni

TreeFolks became the face of reforestation for Bastrop County.

Matt Myers, Reforestation Coordinator

TreeFolks is a community organization that educates the public on tree planting and tree care practices.

Thaïs Perkins, Executive Director

When the Bastrop fires came through, you know, we were only a tiny non-profit of only three or four people. And we were approached by the Lost Pines recovery team, and they asked if we could work with upwards of 1,000 land owners to put 2.2 million trees in the ground. And I think in the room there was essentially stunned silence. TreeFolks had never been asked to do anything like this before in its history.

Jim Rooni

The challenge was, how do we get trees onto all these private lands in Bastrop County that burned?

The Honorable Paul Pape

It takes lots of hands, lots of gloves, and lots of boots on the ground to replant a million pine trees.

Matt Myers

Each volunteer event has maybe up to 100 people, and each contributes several hours at a time. So, over the years we've accumulated thousands of man hours. The seedlings that we plant are the Bastrop native loblolly Pines, and those are ecologically distinct and genetically distinct from those in East Texas. When we get them, they are only about a foot tall, and over the next couple years they can grow several feet tall.

Thais Perkins

Because this is a unique system, it is essential that trees get planted a particular way. And so, we have worked with individual land owners, every single one of them to come out, walk the property, ask them what their needs are, create a plan around their needs. And that is time consuming.

Jim Rooni

But one of the reasons that this ecosystem that these lost pines in Bastrop were so valuable is the emotional toll. People wanted to live in this pine forest. In and amongst pine forests. Almost a sanctuary or retreat.

Thais Perkins

You know, when the fires swept through it took their houses, it took their livelihoods in some cases, but it also took the very thing that made Bastrop what it was. And if TreeFolks can have some hand in restoring that for these exceptional people in this beautiful place, then I think everything would have been worthwhile.

The Honorable Paul Pape

Every now and then you have to give mother nature a hand, and TreeFolks is mother nature's right hand in Bastrop County.