

20 YEARS

& WE STILL HAVEN'T MANAGED TO SORT IT ALL OUT

In September, the Earth Sangha turned 20 years old. Lisa and I, the Sangha's founders, are very grateful to everyone who has played a role in the Sangha's growth over the past two decades — and during the next two, we're hoping that you'll really step up your game. (I jest; you have to indulge me at my age.) We're planning to tell you about our hopes for the next 20 years in the December *Acorn*. In the meantime, we thought that you might appreciate the following chronicle of the Sangha's accomplishments to date.

— Chris Bright

September 3, 1997: The Sangha is officially incorporated. The world does not change perceptibly on that account. Lisa starts our meditation group shortly thereafter. We sit in her Asian art gallery in Old Town, Alexandria, Virginia.

September 1998: Chris and Matt (son of Lisa and Chris; he's nine at the time) collect acorns and hickory nuts to test the idea of a nursery dedicated to local-ecotype propagation. Matt throws most of his hickory nuts at Chris.

March 1999: The acorns begin to sprout but squirrels chew up most of the seedlings. Oh well. But they did sprout!

September 1999: Chris and Lisa begin propagating dozens of tree seedlings in their backyard, much to the neighbors' consternation.

June 2001: We reach an agreement with Fairfax County, Virginia, to develop our Wild Plant Nursery at Franconia Park, in Springfield, and

we begin work there. (See the photo above.)

September 2001: Our first, large-scale seed-collection effort begins. Those efforts have grown in bulk, area covered, species included, and technical sophistication every year thereafter.

April 2002: We begin our first, rather tentative restoration effort in a local park — Wilburdale Park in Annandale, Virginia.

January 2004: The Sangha acquires its first paid full-time employee: Chris. Sometimes you just have to work with what you got.

May 2004: We start work at the Marie Butler Leven Preserve (MBLP), which is almost completely swallowed up by invasive alien plants.

January 2005: The Sangha agrees to implement Fairfax County's Riparian Buffer Restoration Project. Our job was to supply plants, design the plantings, and work with volunteers to put the plantings in. The project ran until April 2009. (See next page.) This effort also marked the start of our large-scale partnerships with local schools.

November 2005: The annual number of volunteer hours logged at our nursery and field sites exceeds 10,000 for the first time.

November 2005 again: The number of species in propagation at our nursery exceeds 100 for the first time.

Photos: Above, the site of our Wild Plant Nursery in June 2001, on our first day of construction. Most of the site is now shaded growing space. Below, a section of that space during our Fall Open House, last September.



June 2006: The Tree Bank is founded in the Dominican community of Los Cerezos, about five miles from the border with Haiti. The founders: Chris, Matt, Tommy Ventre (local Peace Corps volunteer at the time), and Gaspar Pérez Aquino, a farmer and head of the local community association. We build a nursery in Los Cerezos.

Growing season of 2006: Our Virginia nursery inventory takes a turn towards herbaceous (non-woody) species. We are already growing most of the tree and shrub species that are useful for local restoration projects; expanding our herbaceous inventory is the next logical step.

November 2006: The annual number of volunteers helping at our nursery and field sites reaches 500 for the first time.

April 2009: Fairfax County's riparian buffer project ends. (See January 2005.) The project planted nearly 10,000 native trees and shrubs, representing over 80 species, on about 30 sites covering over 18 acres, along more than two miles of stream bank. Some 1,500 volunteers participated.

June 2009: Our meditation group moves to the Yoga in Daily Life building in Del Ray, Alexandria, its present location.

August 2011: The Tree Bank Forest Credit program begins. Forest Credit makes small lines of credit available to farmers who agree to conserve forest on their lands. Our first set of loans amounts to about \$5,800.

August 2011 again: Our first shipment of Rising Forests® coffee arrives. Rising Forests coffee is grown by Tree Bank farmers in small groves under native forest canopy. Coffee profits create a powerful incentive to conserve forest.

December 2011: The number of species in our local propagation system passes 200.

February & March 2012: An anecdote. Chris sort of abandons Matt in Los Cerezos for a month or so. Matt goes off on a motorcycle road trip through part of Haiti with some Haitian doctor friend of his. Chris is not delighted with this arrangement but is in no position to prevent it. Chris learns not to abandon Matt.

December 2012: The Tree Bank's land in care reaches 100 acres.

April 2013: The Tree Bank establishes a community-owned "Nature Reserve" of about 45 acres — the first such reserve in the region.

November 2013: Sophie Lynn approaches us about the empty house at MBLP. Sophie and her husband, David Frederick, eventually fund the rehabilitation of that structure, a project that Sophie herself directs. See June 2017.

December 2013: The National Park Service allows us to use its

greenhouse on Daingerfield Island in Alexandria. The NPS greenhouse continues to play an important role in our local propagation program.

Also December 2013: The Tree Bank's land in care reaches 200 acres.

January 2014: Our local team of paid employees grows to five for the first time. (That's also the number of our current local paid staff.)

July 2014: Matt begins to develop an Arc GIS tagging system for DC-area wild plant populations. This is our first sustained attempt to develop an information resource.

September 3, 2014: Gaspar, the Tree Bank's Director, dies of a stroke. Alfonso Sanchez ("Manolo") and Cosme Damián Quesada become our in-country Co-Directors.

December 2014: The number of species in our local propagation system passes 300.

March 2015: The coffee leaf-rust pathogen has destroyed all of the Tree Bank's coffee groves. We begin propagating thousands of rust-resistant seedlings to restore the groves. We also begin large-scale propagation of another shade-grown tree crop: cacao (the source of cocoa and chocolate).

September 2015: The Fairfax County Park Authority agrees to let us use its large greenhouse in Chantilly; our use of the structure continues despite a period of uncertainty over insurance.

November 2015: The annual number of trees, shrubs, and herbaceous plants distributed from our Wild Plant Nursery exceeds 20,000 for the first time.

May 2016: The Tree Bank acquires a second nursery.

December 2016: We begin working with the Virginia Society of Ornithology on an annual bird census in the Tree Bank area.

April 2017: The Tree Bank Forest Credit program lends over 1 million pesos (about \$22,200) for the first time.

June 2017: Renovation of the MBLP house is completed and two members of our staff, Matt and Katherine, move in. Restoration work at the Preserve arcs rapidly upward.

July 2017: The first edition of the Tree Bank's tree list is published. The list is a collaborative effort involving the Dominican Republic's National Botanical Garden, Tree Bank farmers, and us.

Also July 2017: The number of farms participating in the Tree Bank surpasses 50 for the first time.

July 2017 yet again: The Tree Bank's land in care passes 300 acres.

September 2017: Our Dominican staff grows to six.

October 2017: Cosme and Manolo begin working with an agronomist to certify Rising Forests® cocoa and coffee as organic.



Photo: Matt (left) and his host, Tommy Ventre, take in the view from their Los Cerezos digs in June 2006, the month of the Tree Bank's founding. Adonis (far right — in this photo but not politically) considers the social possibilities. Today, Adonis lives in a cabin just a few yards from this one; Tommy is a teacher in Baltimore, and Matt lives with Katherine at the Marie Butler Leven Preserve. (See the interview with Sophie.) In January, this cabin will probably host a flock of American birders for the Tree Bank's annual bird count.

WHAT SHE SEES IN THE LEVEN HOUSE

In November 2013, we got an email from Sophie Lynn, asking whether we would be interested in working together, to do something about the vacant house in the Marie Butler Leven Preserve, in the McLean section of Fairfax County, Virginia. We had been working on the Preserve grounds since 2004, and Sophie was a neighbor of the Preserve. At the time, she lived just across the road.

The house had become a chronic source of local angst — another neighbor once approached Matt Bright, our Conservation Manager, with an offer of support if we could figure out how to have the thing torn down. But where others might have seen just a nuisance, Sophie saw an opportunity. And over the next four years, her guidance and expertise in historic preservation effectively re-created that house, building modern necessities into its original form and fabric. But she did more than just manage this process; she and her husband, David Frederick, also paid for it. Nothing remotely like this had ever happened to us before, and I don't have any reason to think that it will happen again.

The project was completed in early June and by the end of that month, two members of the Sangha's staff, Matt and Katherine Isaacson, our Development and Outreach Coordinator, had moved in, in accordance with the lease agreement that we had reached with the County. In September, I sat down with Sophie, on the Leven House porch, to get her thoughts on how the project had worked. Here is what she told me. (My questions are in green.)

— *Chris Bright*

CB: Why do this project? There must have been dozens of projects that you could have done. Why this one — other than the fact that you practically lived next door?

SL: Living next door had a little bit to do with it. I'm from Washington, DC, and when I moved to McLean, I really wanted to experience a sense of community, because that's how I function best. And so very quickly I noticed that the Earth Sangha already had a marker in the landscape, through your on-going work at the Preserve. And that perception, combined with my background in historic preservation, piqued my interest in this empty house. And I was catapulted into action after a series of incidents involving young people who were using the place destructively for their partying. I'm definitely in favor of enjoying the landscape at any age, but when the fabric of the house was being damaged by glass breaking, parties after midnight, and so on, I decided to write a proposal —

And you realized that this was occurring because you were living right across the street.

Yes. The glass breaking would wake me up at night. So I decided to write a proposal to the Fairfax County Park Authority [the agency that owns the Preserve], after I consulted with you all, to see if you would be interested in being a partner in a collaborative, citizen-driven effort to rehabilitate the house and occupy it for the purposes of the Earth Sangha's management of the park.

And what about the house itself? What kind of value do you see in it? It's not of great historical importance.

Well that's right, but this is a charming, Cape Cod – style cottage that was dear to Maurice Leven, the person who built it — so much so that he sought to preserve it in the very carefully worded deed that



She's not an architect in the literal sense, but that's an apt metaphor for her: Sophie Lynn is an expert in historical preservation and an architect of visionary change, if we could put it that way. Her Leven House project is transforming the Marie Butler Leven Preserve as a whole. This photo, taken in September, shows Sophie in front of the Leven House's front door, which is painted bright red to complement the white brick exterior.

gave this property to the Park Authority to be an arboretum for public benefit upon his death. And out of respect for his cherishing this house, one had to approach rehabilitating it and making it livable, by trying to retain as much of the original material as possible. But at the same time, we had to modernize the place, to make living here feasible — and pleasurable.

What was the toughest part of this project?

Two things. First, the toughest part was getting the attention of the Park Authority and convincing the leaders and staff there that our proposal represented a bona fide win-win opportunity for all involved. The gestational period amounted to several years. We had to find a way to allow citizens to lead the rehabilitation of a somewhat dilapidated property for the public's benefit. Once Supervisor Foust — John Foust — got on board, the project picked up momentum and our collaboration began to work as a team. That part was really fun.

The other challenging piece came at the very end. Some heavy rains last spring showed us how porous the basement was. And having to deal with that at the end of the construction phase, and the added expense — that created a classic construction-project challenge.

So that kind of difficulty typically comes up in projects like these?

Oh, absolutely. That's why builders want to have some kind of contingency fee built into contracts, to handle the unexpected. We almost got away without an unexpected problem, but not quite.

I suppose that it's good, in a way, that it happened during the construction phase, since it was easier to fix.

Absolutely. It happened on a day when there were workmen in the house, as well as the project manager for our Design / Build firm,

Bowers Design Build. And he literally filmed the water pouring in through the failed concrete block envelope in the basement walls, so it was Mother Nature showing the way to a better project.

But in both challenges, I think the team — the whole team — worked together, showing creativity and adaptability.

From a bureaucratic perspective, was this an unusually complicated project? There were a lot of players: a big public agency, a little nonprofit, you and David, and of course the people who actually did the physical work. How unusual is that?

I think that the relationships in this situation were not exactly the norm but they are becoming more accepted, as a kind of public / private venture.

And that's important because public funding is often not available when you just need to get something done, right?

Right. And in this case, apart from a gift from one of your board members, David and I sponsored the whole of this project, and all citizens who use this park will benefit. But I could not have done as good a job as we ultimately did without the protective umbrella of the Earth Sangha —

It's a very small umbrella, Sophie.

It's a small umbrella but you know, like that Rihanna song, "You can stand under my umbrella," sometimes all you need is a little shelter. You all gave me a role within your organization that worked smoothly with the existing relationship that you already had with the Park Authority. And that was pretty neat.

My last question: thinking longer term, what sort of vision do you have for the house? We have this beautiful, functioning structure that reflects the vision of the people who built it — how do you see that as affecting the various other roles that this property has?

So there are several answers to the question. At one level, the historic fabric of the house, the fact that we have conserved it on its original, 22-acre tract, absolutely adds character and richness of place to this part of McLean. What you have here in the Preserve is like a pair of lungs that add vitality to this community. At another level, the answer can be found in what visitors to the Preserve are exposed to. They can see the work of the Earth Sangha as a very effective manager of this Preserve. They can see your volunteers fending off invasive species and promoting the growth of native species. People notice. For example, there is currently a spectacular display of yellow flowers in the meadow [tickseed sunflower (*Bidens aristosa*)].

So from an educational perspective, there is an opportunity here for people to see, learn, and participate in caring for their immediate environment. And then there is another level of seeing as well. In the house, people can see proof that our model worked: we can reclaim a little old house, and it can be an attractive and fully functional part of this rapidly changing suburban environment. And that's an important message for people to see and understand as well.

Maybe especially in McLean.

Yes. We don't have to tear down everything, and rebuild it as a mega-mansion. There is a place for small older houses as well.

Editor's note: Since Matt and Katherine moved into the house at the end of June, the Sangha's expenditures on the Preserve, including nursery stock, materials, and volunteer and staff time, have surpassed \$40,000.

Photo: Samali on her fifth birthday, last August 13, waves to the Americans, at her mother's request. Samali lives with her mother, Mari, and her grandmother, Catana, in the little village of Los Cerezos, where the Tree Bank is based. When Chris and Matt visit, they stay with this trio of strong and genial women — old, young, and five.



The Earth Sangha is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) charity based in the Washington, DC, area and devoted to ecological restoration. We work in the spirit of Buddhist practice, but our members and volunteers come from a wide variety of religious and secular backgrounds.

Want to contact us or make a donation? You can support our work by becoming a member. Membership starts at \$35 per year. Donations are tax-deductible. You can mail us a check (made out to "Earth Sangha") or donate on our website. We will send you a receipt and include you in our mailings. (If your name and address are correct on your check, there is no need to send us anything else.) To donate specifically to our DC-Area programs, write "DC-Area" on the check memo line; to donate specifically to the Tree Bank, write "Tree Bank" on the memo line. [Contact us at: Earth Sangha, 10123 Commonwealth Blvd., Fairfax, VA 22032-2707 | info@earthsangha.org | \(703\) 764-4830.](mailto:info@earthsangha.org) Complete program information is available on our website.

Want to volunteer or meditate with us? We work with volunteers at our Wild Plant Nursery and our field sites in northern Virginia. We meditate in the Del Ray section of Alexandria on Tuesday evenings. For more information see our website or call Lisa Bright at (703) 764-4830.

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