

A green rectangular graphic with a repeating pattern of stylized leaves. In the center, there is a white rectangular box containing the text "FOREST RELEAF OF MISSOURI IMPACT STORIES" in a green, serif font.

## FOREST RELEAF OF MISSOURI IMPACT STORIES

**“Thanking God for this tree planting because the energy that has been going on here in Missouri has been negative energy, but the planting of the trees, thank you God, can bring some positive energy and new life.”**

**-Kimberly Wallace**

## **Family Love/Family Roots**

To lose a loved one to gun violence is devastating. Grief and trauma ripple through the family and community in ways we in the larger community cannot fully fathom. How does one heal?

A retired ER doctor and long-time volunteer of Forest ReLeaf, John Milton, wondered this very thing. Working with the trees at the Forest ReLeaf nursery, he knew these silent beings offered many things – fresh air and numerous environmental benefits – but he also knew they provided peace. His family often planted a tree in honor of a loved one who had passed on. After seeing a photo of a march to end gun violence in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, and reading about how so many people were so exhausted from guns and drugs, John immediately thought about a tree planting. He called the Post-Dispatch and they connected him with Better Family Life in North City.

Better Family Life has been around for over 40 years, stabilizing inner-city neighborhoods and serving more than 50,000 low-income children and adults each year with a wide-range of programs. Anitress Muhammed, Assistant to the Director in the organization’s Community Engagement Department, met with John. After their initial meeting, they determined the best way to utilize the donation of trees would be to plant life for a life through a new program, which was given the name Family Love/Family Roots.

The first memorial tree planting took place in Fall 2019. Fifteen trees were planted with 15 families in Ivory Perry Park. Everyone in attendance that day was witnessing something special. Families shared their grief, while simultaneously expressing gratitude for the trees and the peace that they unexpectedly brought. It was hard to put into words the impact from that day, but Anitress knew more families needed to experience this healing journey.

In 2020, thirty trees were planted in Penrose Park serving 30 more families. In spring 2021, nineteen trees were planted at Eugene 'Tink' Bradley Park. One parent had shared that they had played in that very park as a child, and felt a tremendous sense of comfort knowing that their own child's memory would be connected with a tree planted there. In fall of that same year, families were reaching out to Better Family Life to participate. Fifteen more trees were planted in Penrose Park with more than 100 people in attendance. Families shared their tears. They also shared their smiles.

With each planting, families are invited to bury a memento of their loved one at the base of the tree. For some families, it is the first time they are able to symbolically "bury" their loved one because they have been unable to afford a funeral. Each time, the trees silently accept the offering; they silently stand watch; and they silently hum with life.

"Having the tree planting with other families is a way to come together as a community and grieve together," explained Precious Jones, a mother who lost her son Preston at just 20 years of age. "Gun violence is the strain on our country. We are in a crisis." Nowhere is this seen more deeply than in a classroom in North City. A group of 6th graders were asked to raise their hand if they had lost a family member to gun violence. All hands went into the air. When asked to raise both hands and both feet if they had 4 or more family members lost to gun violence, 60% of those students were impacted. "There is not enough peace that our youth see," Precious continued. "We need partnerships that display unity and love."

In Fall 2022, families marched down Page Avenue from Better Family Life's headquarters to Beckett Park in protest of gun violence. Kimberly Wallace was there with 30 other families, again with more than 100 people in attendance. "Thanking God for this tree planting because the energy that has been going on here in Missouri has been negative energy, but the planting of the trees, thank you God, can bring some positive energy and new life." Kimberly lost a son in 2004, Charles Wallace, and another one in 2020, Leonard Wilkins Jr.

Better Family Life is proud to have Forest ReLeaf as a partner in this healing work. Anitress has expressed that "since the very beginning of Family Love/Family Roots Tree Planting Celebration, our families have been truly grateful. The goal of offering a life for a life was met with much love and satisfaction. We know that the community is suffering due to the

extreme amount of gun violence, deaths and crimes against human life. It's hard trying to ease the pain that a family suffers when a family member is suddenly taken away from us, but sometimes through counseling we are comforted. We wanted to give a long lasting sense of peace, healing and comfort by planting trees in our neighborhood parks, close to the families, to celebrate the life that lived for a moment in time."

In 2023, the Family Love/Family Roots Tree Planting Celebration expanded to include families who have lost loved ones to drug overdoses. More than 250 people marched from Better Family Life's headquarters to Ivory Perry Park, the site of the first tree planting back in 2019. To honor so many lives lost, one larger tree was selected in place of one tree per family. The 'Tree of Life' it is called - a bur oak, selected for its ability to live a long life. Several families were invited to say a few words and all who lost a loved one were invited to put a shovelful of soil into the hole. Precious Jones was there. "At first I was a little sad putting down the soil. Then when I saw the other families adding soil, it was the moment I knew that Preston's soul was reborn with the others and now has an extended family." In addition to losing Preston, Precious lost her brother, Paul L. Jones, Sr., to a drug overdose in 2021 who was also honored that day.

Families continue to share their gratitude with Anitress for creating a resting place for their loved ones. They appreciate the peace and warm feeling of visiting a park, instead of a cold cemetery. The partnership with Better Family Life has made a major impact in serving the community, one that will last for generations.

Better Family Life is an organization focused on uniting families and empowering communities. They are located in the Hamilton Heights neighborhood of North St. Louis City. Forest ReLeaf is proud to provide and steward trees for the community in this way. Additionally, Forest ReLeaf is grateful to John Milton for creating the connection with Better Family Life, and for the many volunteers and organizations over the years that have contributed behind the scenes preparing the sites for the families to heal while planting their memorial trees.





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