

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

**“You spend 40 years trying to stabilize and improve the area and now it is finally turning around and improving with the help of organizations like ReLeaf.”**

**- Gordon C.**

## **Trees, Trails, and Humans**

Not all people view trees as a necessity. They see leaves as a nuisance, falling branches a danger, and trees as, well, big! While it's true that poorly maintained trees can be hazardous and unhealthy trees are expensive to cut down (and let's be honest, who likes raking leaves?) but we **NEED** trees. Lots of them, in fact, if we are to have healthy, sustainable communities.

Over the last two years, Forest ReLeaf of Missouri has partnered with Great Rivers Greenway to establish more tree canopy along both completed and upcoming greenways that are primarily concentrated in North St. Louis City. The St. Vincent Greenway, which traverses the long, narrow city park known as Ruth Porter Mall, is one greenway that has benefitted from the partnership. Ruth Porter Mall Park spans northward from the intersection at DeBaliviere Avenue and Delmar Boulevard all the way to Etzel Avenue in the West End Neighborhood. The park is named for Ruth Porter, a founder and the first Black woman executive secretary of the Greater St. Louis Committee for Freedom of Residence, which began in 1961 to integrate housing in St. Louis. Ruth Porter achieved great success as a community leader being awarded many times over for her work in breaking down housing restrictions.

West End's long-time resident, Gordon C., shared his delight when speaking with us. The history of his community is fresh in his mind as if it was yesterday. He told us that Ruth

Porter Mall Park had been a project that was started in the 60's. However, over time, neglect and blight turned the greenspace into an unsightly, unappreciated and unsafe environment. "It's great to have the [new] trees there. They will provide shade in the summer and make the neighborhood's overall look more appealing." He said that since the arrival of the greenway, the park has been used for outdoor lessons and as a safe space to play for a homeschooling group. "You spend 40 years trying to stabilize and improve the area and now it is finally turning around and improving with the help of organizations like ReLeaf."

Two other West End residents, Karen and Kim, next door neighbors that have both been in the neighborhood for many years, spoke with us. Kim was excited to see the addition of the trail access to Delmar. She said that her family had lived in the area since before Great Rivers Greenway added the trail, which is a nice feature in their growing neighborhood. She spoke of how her family compliments the park whenever they visit. Karen spoke highly of the beautification and how the upcoming spring will draw people to the park as the trees bloom. "I'm looking forward to seeing the kids use the park in the spring when everything is fully bloomed and pretty." Both women agreed that seeing bicyclists pass by makes them comfortable. Having active trail users and newly planted trees gives the neighborhood a new energy. "It feels good seeing kids playing in the park area surrounded by trees. I can see myself using [the park] for a family gathering now. The trees make it look nice." Kim feels that the neighborhood is beginning to feel like it once did.

In Fall 2022, Forest ReLeaf and Great Rivers Greenway planted 40 trees near Etzel Avenue. The community was invited to provide feedback about the trees' placements before planting, and when the planting day finally arrived, several nearby residents came out to show their support alongside volunteers. In Spring 2023, an additional 30 trees were planted. Since then, Forest ReLeaf staff continue to water and care for the trees, ensuring their long-term health and survival. Despite the unexpected knock on the door on a late fall afternoon, these three nearby residents were happy to share the impact of the

year's worth of investments to two strangers covered in dirt after finishing an afternoon of mulching at the park.

**Environmental injustice impacts everyone.**

Trees are awesome! Trees give off oxygen that we need to breathe. They are a source of healthy food. They reduce air pollutants as well as pollution in our waterways and may reduce the effects of flooding. Strategically planting trees can cut summer air conditioning needs by up to 30 percent, and reduce carbon dioxide and other pollutants. We need trees, and due to climate change, trees need humans as stewards to maintain their health. The West End neighborhood gleams with promise and hope of a sustainable lush tree canopy.



