

Enterprise

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TIM LAMORTE/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Shae Shandroff, age 7, pulls vines while helping her mother, Melissa, who is the advisor to the Hastings High School Environmental Club.

Swarming volunteers free trees from invasive vines

By Julian Caldwell

REGION — Grade-schoolers, senior citizens, and those in between sacrificed their Saturday last weekend to save trees as part of a vine-cutting “SWARM” along the South County Trailway near the Lawrence Street exit of the Saw Mill River Parkway. The Nov. 16 event lasted five sunny hours, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Groundwork Hudson Valley, a nonprofit based in Yonkers, and more specifically its Saw Mill River Coalition program, organized the outing, which attracted 18 partner groups, such as the Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct, Hastings High School Environmental Club, the Garden Club of Irvington, the Hastings Vine Squad and HelpHalsey 123. With 174-plus participants, this was Groundwork’s

largest vine-cutting crew for what river program director Ann-Marie Mitroff described as a cause all local residents should care about.

“We really need to protect the trees so that we have a good stormwater advance,” said Mitroff, a Dobbs Ferry resident who’s worked for Groundwork since 2005. “They’re really great

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for that, and we're complaining all the time about flooding on the Saw Mill [Parkway]. The trees help with that."

Getting rid of vines, which can weigh trees down up to 10 pounds for every 10 feet of vine, also benefits motorists, according to Mitroff.

"The more trees you have that are unhealthy, the more they fall down," she said. "Along the Saw Mill Parkway, nobody likes that."

Vines along the trail range in thickness from about a quarter-inch to a few inches. Porcelain berry, bittersweet, and multiflora rose are the three most prevalent types of invasive vines. Using loppers, clippers, and their hands, the volunteers removed the vines that had, in some cases, overtaken whole trees.

"You cut as high as you can so you can see where you've been and other people can see where you've been," Mitroff said. Then, "We try to pull it as much as we can from the bottom, cut it, and then cover it over with a little soil. It's got to have sunlight to grow."

Jordan Chow, a 16-year-old senior at Horace Greeley High School in Chappaqua and founder of Trail Mix, his school's trail-maintenance club, attended the SWARM with two other club members. Chow, who has participated

in previous Groundwork vine-cutting events, said one of the most enjoyable parts is "being able to go out and say I know this person and say 'Hi' and reconnect. That's a great aspect. It makes you feel like there are other people around you who are like-minded and have the same passion."

Jen Beato, 28, and the three other volunteers who came with her from Green Eileen in Yonkers, had a unique approach to the event. Green Eileen is a recycled clothing program that is a part of the Eileen Fisher Community Foundation.

"What we're planning on doing is not) only supporting the initiative, but we want to then take the vines and weave them into wreaths and offer a wreath-making workshop at the store," Beato said.

The rest of the cut vines, according to Mitroff, were left beside the trail either to decompose or be picked up by the Westchester County Parks Department, which is responsible for maintenance of the trail.

Students from Ardsley High School's Environmental Club, led by advisor and science teacher Daniel Barnett, also participated. Barnett and club members have volunteered for vine cutting with Groundwork for six years.

"Our students are eager to come out and do things," he said. "Having this trail that we want to make sure is acces-

sible to everyone and stays nice — that takes effort and work. And the students are the ones who founded this [club]; this wasn't my idea."

Groundwork recently started focusing on the Lawrence Street section of the 14-mile trailway. For the past two to three years, it concentrated on a section in Hastings, between Farragut Avenue and Ravensdale Road. By gathering 20 to 30 people once a month, they've made a significant difference there.

"You can see the openness. You can see the trees, the leaves, the branches. You can see that whole section," Mitroff said. "Whereas you get out of that area and you start seeing just vines."

Because it is such a long process, Groundwork Hudson's Invasive Vine Task Force organized the SWARM in Ardsley to get a head start on that section by involving groups from surrounding areas that often only work on their local trails.

"They said, 'Boy, it would be great to get everybody together and work on one area,'" Mitroff said.

Even with all of the hands that cut and pulled vines during last weekend's SWARM, clearing the area will take regular campaigns for a couple of years.

To get involved in future vine-cutting events, visit sawmillrivercoalition.org.