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The luxury of saving a single tree

BY CHIVAS SANDAGE

 EMAIL THIS WRITER

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Do you really mean to say that you don't care about the trees in your neighborhood, even one growing on your street? he quietly asked me. I'll call him "Fred," after Fred Rogers, as he had a similar humble bearing on a spindly physique and a frequent smile creasing his neutral, composed face that I never once saw irritated or serious - except for that moment.

The father of my daughter's close friend, Fred, had confronted me with clipboard in hand on the sidewalk that connected his home and my apartment, asking me to become involved with a project he'd spearheaded - to save a particular tree. I asked if I could sign a petition but hesitated to make any other promises or write a check. Yes, I was the worst sort of renter - a monster, really - and this good man stared at me incredulously.

On that particular afternoon, my priorities were to pay the bills and get dinner on the table while managing my anxiety levels enough to be a relaxed, fun mom. Arms limp at sides, I tried to explain to Fred that while I cared about the local trees, as a single mom working several jobs while starting graduate school, I lived life in survival mode. As an activist, I sent daily letters to various public officials advocating same-sex marriage rights (an issue he appeared to be unconcerned with) and so felt I'd reached a limit on what I could add to my plate. He stared back at me with a blank, uncomprehending face.

Did I think to point to "my house," the eyesore of our lovely little block, thanks to my landlord's car dealership that he'd started out of the garage which shared a thin wall with our living room? The driveway was filled with cars he was fixing up, the back yard overwhelmed by a massive storage unit the size of a Mac truck, the common hallways thick with automotive paint fumes and everywhere you looked there was his junk - old tires, heaps of metal, unidentifiable objects with sharp edges. We lived below this man who stomped around at all hours in

boots, blasted "Highway to Hell" so loud you could hear it a block away, and literally yelled at me if we reported the broken washing machine. My dream of homeownership existed light years away from the reality of my life as an

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unhappy, short term (two years) renter on that block. In fact, I'd already begun looking for another apartment, one where my flower-fairy of a kid might romp around the yard in bare feet.

Fred's eyes hollowed with the dawning clarity that I would not dedicate myself to saving his tree. However, Fred owned the large farmhouse he'd grown up in, located on an expansive piece of property, had well-to-do parents who lived nearby (providing rarely needed child care), while he and his wife had excellent, stable careers doing work they loved. The "blurb" version of my month-to-month struggle might as well have been delivered in Latin.

A tree lover of the first order, not having the luxury to say yes to Fred has haunted me ever since. At 7, I stood in front of a bulldozer until its driver turned off his engine and discussed the fate of a section of woods behind my grandparents' home. I retreated only after realizing that the driver didn't hold the power to save "my trees."

Through the years I've had relationships with several remarkable trees, green spaces and wooded areas. Fascinated by Julia Hill-Butterfly, I followed her work closely for years. In recent years, I had the chance to write as an advocate for the green space across from my apartment, a small wooded area willed to the historical society (for safekeeping) who sold out for their piece of gold to the local, well-landed gentry who managed to sell it once again for a profit. In the end, the community lost one of the last green spaces bordering downtown and a lovely stand of maples. Like the child who stopped that dinosaur of a bulldozer and challenged its driver, by volunteering my work as a writer, I'd tried to make a difference in my own small way.

But what's become terribly clear to me as an adult is that taking a stand - for some folks - is a luxury.

And during my recent years of renting in "nice neighborhoods" of charming, older Northampton homes, neighborhoods that I'll probably never be able to buy in, I've become acutely aware of the class difference between much of my community and me. This feeling is one that I was oblivious to as a kid in Houston who spent much of my childhood living in large apartment complexes that spread out over many blocks, complexes that created sprawling villages of people hailing from all over the world.

We moved a lot so there were exceptions - like the occasional garage apartment, small complex, or a room or bed in someone's home - but for the most part I lived in communities of renters. College dorm living, even as a scholarship student amongst an upper-middle class-to-wealthy majority, necessitated a culture of "renters" as well, as did, for the most part, my New York City neighborhoods such as the Upper West End, Lower West End, the East Village, and Brooklyn's D.U.M.B.O. section of Red Hook. Suddenly I'd become a bus-stop mother wanting to connect with other parents - my rather liberal, progressive community - yet feeling more like an outsider than ever in my life.

There must have been ways I could have helped Fred save his local trees that would not have jeopardized my own efforts to survive that week - but those possibilities did not occur to either of us. I look forward to the day when I can live in my own home, know I won't have to move unless I want to, and invest my time, resources and heart into local matters large and small - even a single maple.

May Fred's tree thrive.

Chivas Sandage, of Northampton, is a professor of World Literature and

Composition at Westfield State College. She also teaches creative writing workshops in Northampton.

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