

Tree People Profile: *This is the first in a series of profiles of people who make a difference for trees in Watertown. Mike Micieli was appointed the city of Watertown's tree warden in July 2022. Prior to his current post, Micieli led teams in the forestry departments of New York City and the City of Boston. Micieli is a West Roxbury resident.*

Q: Tell me a little bit about when trees first made a difference in your life and how you came to select working with trees as a career.

A: I suppose my interest in trees goes all the way back to childhood on Long Island. I had this cedar tree in front of our home, and we climbed it all the time, so it became sort of a special thing. At a certain age I became aware that trees like ours were being removed without replacement and that concerned me. As I grew older that sensibility grew into a concern for nature and trees in general. I knew I wanted to work outside, so working in forestry became a natural choice.

Q: Does your love of nature and trees extend to your personal life?

A: Absolutely. We go a lot to the area of Southern Vermont near Stratton. In addition to snowboarding in the winter, I love to explore the forest in that region, hiking along the Long Trail and the area near Stratton Pond. When you hike a trail like that you can really appreciate what trees do for us. The light in the forest and the smell of the trees make it a special place.

Q: Obviously, tree management in a city like Watertown is very different from the woods of Vermont. What is it about the challenge of urban forestry in particular that you find challenging?

A: Whether country or city, neither environment will prosper without a robust tree canopy. For urban forestry in particular, the biggest challenge is getting people to take an active role in support of the trees. Sometimes people have a passive attitude—they love the trees, but they assume someone else is taking care of them. While the city has a big role to play in building an urban forest, real success depends upon people viewing trees as a precious resource that needs to be cared for. If people are looking out for the tree on their street and keeping the city informed of concerns, we can succeed.

Q: You have worked in the forestry departments of some very large cities, notably New York and Boston. What are the advantages and disadvantages that a small city like Watertown has relative to such large places?

A: While the resources are large in total dollars in such places, it can be hard to get people to develop a sense of ownership about the public trees in their neighborhoods and parks. Watertown's biggest advantage as I see it is a very engaged citizenry. There are people who have been focused on trees for a long time here, and that gives us a good base on which to build a sense of pride about the tree cover in our city.

Q: So-called Tree Equity is a concern in many places including Watertown. What can be done to make sure that the benefits of trees are provided to all neighborhoods equally?

A: I see two main directions here, planting and education. We need to plant as many trees as we can in as many vacant spaces as possible, and the trees need to go to underserved areas first. But we also need to build understanding of the value of trees through public and one to one communication. In particular, we need to share the impact trees have on cooling, air quality and property values. We can't force trees on people, but we can increase demand by increasing understanding of their benefits.

Q: In advancing the tree canopy here in Watertown, what role do you see laws and ordinances playing versus the voluntary actions of individuals?

A: That is a fine line. Under existing law we have twin missions. My title as tree warden speaks to one important piece of that—to protect trees. Yet, we also have an obligation to protect the public from hazardous trees and to evaluate tree removal when legitimate concerns exist regarding interference with public utilities or proposed development. Balancing those obligations can be tricky, and there can be a lot of emotion around decisions to remove trees. Regulation can be effective when it delivers very clear expectations and a transparent process to all parties around tree planting and tree removal. When people know the rules and think they are fairly applied, it reduces one-off arguments and helps us advance the overall mission of building the city's tree canopy.

Q: There has been a lot written about the role trees can play in reducing the impact of climate change. Do you think the public fully understands that or is there still educational work to be done?

A: I think the public gets it intellectually but has not necessarily taken ownership of the issue. We at the city can only do so much without active participation of residents. When residents loudly state their support for increased street tree programs and connect planting trees in their backyards to reducing climate impact, we will have gotten full buy-in.

Q: Watertown is in a time of rapid development. What in your view can be done to create a constructive relationship between government, developers, and tree advocates to secure both the benefits of growth and the benefits of trees?

A: It all comes down to open lines of communication in the planning process. A consistent, well-thought-out plan review process is critical. We need to make sure that any major impacts are seen early in design review and that, if tree losses are unavoidable, the city is compensated fairly.

Q: Last question. Looking ahead five years, if there is one thing you would like to have accomplished in your role, what would it be?

A: I'd like to see a city with an increased consensus around street tree planting that contributes to an overall increased tree canopy.