

'TEACHER, LEADER, FRIEND AND GOOD STEWARD OF THE EARTH'

Newt Hardie remembered for his work for trees, impact on neighborhoods



The Converse Heights Neighborhood Association dedicated a new park bench and planted an oak tree in honor of Newt Hardie.

STORY BY **SAMANTHA SWANN** | PHOTOS BY **TIM KIMZEY**

Newt Hardie, best known for his role in founding the Trees Coalition, was remembered more than a year after his passing during a ceremony at Happy Hollow Park on June 25.

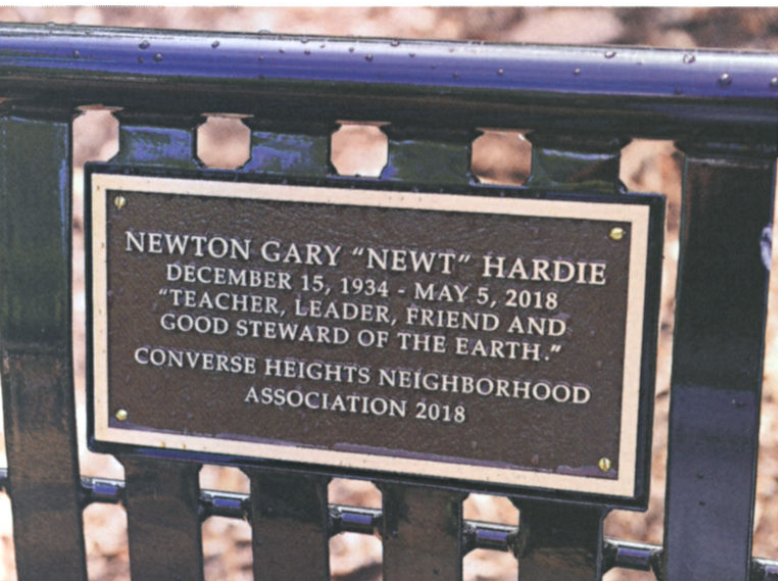
“Newt gave you permission to do the right thing for trees. He knew the difference that small things could make in the landscape and the difference small things could make in people,” said Wesley Hammond, former president and current board member of the Converse Heights Neighborhood Association.

Hardie died in May 2018. A bench, with an inscription describing Hardie as a “teacher, leader, friend and good steward of the earth” was placed next to a newly planted oak tree by the park’s picnic area. It seems a fitting tribute for a man who dedicated his golden years to bringing neighborhoods together to keep Spartanburg beautiful.

Caring for Spartanburg’s green spaces was a full-time job for Hardie, who after more than 40 years at Milliken & Company, turned his eye on the green menace known as kudzu with the goal of protecting native trees. Hardie founded the Kudzu Coalition in 2004, which later became the Trees Coalition in 2013, with his fellow Spartanburg Men’s Garden Club members and began strategically beating back kudzu and other invasive plants. Hardie also developed a pesticide-free method of kudzu removal, which involves removing the crown, a bulb from which the vines grow. Hardie’s method is considered much less labor-intensive and more effective than other pesticide-free methods like digging the weed up from the roots and does not harm any wanted plants.



Newt Hardie works to dig up Kudzu crowns in an effort to clear away the weed near T.K. Gregg Recreation Center. HERALD-JOURNAL FILE PHOTO



The Converse Heights Neighborhood Association dedicated a new park bench and planted an oak tree in honor of Newt Hardie.

Many at the ceremony recalled Hardie’s persistence in engaging neighbors, from coffee meetings and emails to tree parties, where neighbors would gather to learn about caring for their trees and green spaces. City Councilwoman Ruth Littlejohn said that one of the most widely attended tree parties took place in her basement in 2012, where she and the attendees learned tree planting tips from a Spartanburg Community College professor.

“From the day I met Newt Hardie, I knew he had a passion for ridding Spartanburg County of kudzu and other invasive plants. He was great at pulling people together to combat these invasive plants,” said Littlejohn. “Newt Hardie made a tremendous difference in the South Converse Community. He would often meet with us to educate us on how to eliminate invasive plants in our neighborhood.”



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Hammond said Hardie was “an invaluable advisor” in the Ravine Project, working with Hammond, Chuck White, and Everett Powers and the Converse Heights Neighborhood Association as they began revitalizing the 16-acre forest in the neighborhood. In Woodland Heights and Park Hills, Hardie inspired the beautification projects of Melvin Norwood and Perry Lee, said Councilman Sterling Anderson.

Hardie and the Trees Coalition also worked on the trails system. Laura Ringo, executive director of Partners for Active Living, said Hardie worked on a number of trails and parks, including the Mary Black Foundation Rail Trail, the River Birch Trail and the Drayton Trails, and placed educational signs about invasive plants and tree care on high traffic trails.

“The Trees Coalition clean-ups engaged community members who wanted to volunteer and improve our public spaces, which was, and is, especially helpful when our governmental partners are stretched,” Ringo said.

Hardie was a helper in many neighborhoods throughout the city, and community leaders admired the way his environmental endeavors united neighborhoods.

“Not only did Mr. Hardie help to beautify our city, but his persistence and dedication serve as an inspiration to all of us who love Spartanburg,” City Councilman Jamie Fulmer said. “What he did with the Trees and Kudzu Coalition speaks to the power that one individual can have when they see a problem and try to fix it. He brought folks from all over our community together and created a movement.”

And his work did not go unnoticed. During his lifetime, Hardie was honored with a number of awards, including the 2002 Volunteer of the Year from United Way of the Piedmont, the 2009 Advocate of the Year from the Spartanburg chapter of the SC Council for Exceptional Children, the 2016 Volunteer of the Year from Hatcher Garden, where the Trees Coalition still holds weekly events, and the 2017 Good Neighbor Award from the Converse Heights Neighborhood Association. Hardie was also the recipient of the 2018 Duke Energy Citizenship Award from the Spartanburg Chamber of Commerce, received posthumously.

“He didn’t just make better neighborhoods,” said Hammond. “He made better neighbors.”