

SOUTH SUBURBS

After 35 years of volunteerism, this Greenfield resident to be honored with park dedication



Liliana Fannin

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

June 11, 2025 | Updated June 18, 2025, 3:45 p.m. CT

Joan Stevens built and moved into her home in Greenfield with her husband 51 years ago. Today, her touch can be seen all across the city.

Stevens' efforts have led to the planting of over 3,400 trees, an annual Arbor Day celebration, funding of public art and the founding of both the Greenfield Beautification Committee and the Tree Commission, among other things.

"She's so dedicated to making sure that the city is a better place," Greenfield Mayor Michael Neitzke said. "There are very few people like her in the world. She's selfless, she's generous, she's passionate about making this city beautiful."

After 35 years of diligent volunteerism to beautify Greenfield, Stevens will be honored with the [dedication of the Joan D. Stevens Woods](#), at 8601 W. Howard Ave. The space is currently the site of [Towering Woods Nature Area](#). The land features natural trails and around 60 species of native and non-native vegetation, including red oak and hickory trees, according to the City of Greenfield website.

The dedication was originally scheduled for June 18. Due to inclement weather, it will now take place on Thursday, June 19, at 5:30 p.m.

"Even if I had never gotten an award, I would still be very satisfied myself with what I was able to do," Stevens said.

Sprucing up the median of 84th and Layton sparked a chain reaction that spread to every corner of the city

Stevens' road to creating change in Greenfield started with a realization.

"I looked around in 1989 and 1990, and I just thought, I don't want to live in a city that is this ugly," Stevens said. "It didn't even have any street signs, it was full of litter, and there were no parks, there were no street trees."

So, she did something about it.

In 1991, at the age of 58, Stevens held a fundraising drive among local businesses to install flower boxes and trees in the median strip at 84th and Layton. The Greenfield Observer, the local newspaper at the time, reported on the effort, which would ultimately become the first of many instances where her city enhancement work was featured.

Around that time, Stevens had also put an ad in the paper to find members to join her in a Beautification Committee for the city, an initiative she spearheaded. She recruited 12 local volunteers, and together, they came up with a plan.

"There was something to do that Greenfield really badly needed," Stevens said.

With Stevens as their leader, a few of the Greenfield Beautification Committee's initial endeavors included creating and installing welcome signs for the city and holding a citywide vote to determine the city flower.

The welcome signs were painted by the home maintenance class of Greenfield High School, after Stevens raised funding and planned the design. Daylilies won by a landslide in the vote for city flower.

According to Stevens, at that time, the local government was agreeable to her taking the reins and doing what she thought was best, as long as she and the committee could secure the funding themselves.

Soon after, Stevens launched both an [Arbor Day](#) event and a “Clean Up Green Up” litter program with the Beautification Committee, along with an annual landscape award contest.

Winners of the landscape contest would receive a sign to put up in their front yard for two weeks that said "Greenfield's Most Beautiful Landscape." Stevens noticed the friendly competition encouraged others in the community to step up their yardwork efforts the following year.

"What happened was that the city started becoming more beautiful residentially," Stevens said. "And then I started one for the businesses, and the businesses started looking better."

Annual Arbor Day led to thousands of trees planted in Greenfield

Arbor Day is a nationally celebrated observance that encourages tree planting and care. Stevens organized the first unofficial Arbor Day for Greenfield in 1991. Just three years later, in 1994, Greenfield was acknowledged as a [Tree City USA](#) for the first time by the [Arbor Day Foundation](#) and has been recognized every year since, according to the City of Greenfield website.

The annual Arbor Day event has resulted in the planting of trees at the schools, streets and parks in Greenfield.

"We have treed the city, and that's my big reward," Stevens said.

Greenfield also holds the longest active [Growth Award](#) streak in the state, which can be attributed to Stevens's longtime leadership and the Beautification Committee's year-after-year sponsorships.

The Growth Award recognizes Tree City USA communities for outstanding tree care and community engagement.

"There is no one else in the community that has had that kind of long-lasting impact," Neitzke said.

Stevens grabbed the local government's attention after Greenfield's first Arbor Day

Stevens said she had high hopes for the first Arbor Day celebration in Greenfield in 1991.

"I figured if I got some trees planted successfully, it would get the mayor and the council's attention," she said.

And it did.

After the first Arbor Day, Stevens was asked to start a Tree Commission to advise the local government on tree planting and maintenance for the city. The Greenfield Tree Commission was founded in 1992, according to the city's website.

Stevens did about a year's worth of research as the commission's first chair. She went around and reached out to foresters and other experts from different cities to learn from them and see what they do.

Neitzke was an alderperson at the time and sat on the Tree Commission when it was first established. He described the long hours he spent in meetings as an alderperson, but none were as long as the Tree Commission meetings, he said.

"She wanted to make sure that things were done and things were done right, that things would be long-lasting, institutionalized," Neitzke said about Stevens. "That this wasn't going to be some sort of passing fad. She wanted to make sure that it became part of the city's DNA."

Since then, Stevens has recruited a city forester, Dennis Fermenich, to join the Tree Commission, and to this day, Stevens still sits as chair, where she and her members meet every other month.

"I didn't do it myself," Stevens said, pointing out that she had the backing of the Beautification Committee, the Common Council and the mayor.

Stevens was 'on a cloud' when she found out about the park dedication in her honor

Beyond beautifying the City of Greenfield, Stevens is a classically trained concert pianist. She worked as a program director at a nursing home for 16 years while raising six children practically on her own before marrying her now husband, Bill Stevens.

"I'm just so darn proud of her," Bill Stevens said. "You know, once she grabs onto something, she doesn't let go. She just keeps going, and it's changed our life."

When the idea first came up to dedicate the park in Stevens' honor, Neitzke said the Common Council was unanimously on board.

And what was Stevens' reaction?

"Oh, I felt great, I just felt great," Stevens said. "I was on a cloud."

(This story was updated to add new information.)

Liliana Fannin is a 2025 summer intern at the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel covering the Milwaukee suburbs. She can be contacted at lfannin@gannett.com.