

HANDS ON

**MNLA PROMOTES
VOLUNTEERING
FOR THE BENEFIT
OF STAFF AS
WELL AS THE
COMMUNITY.**

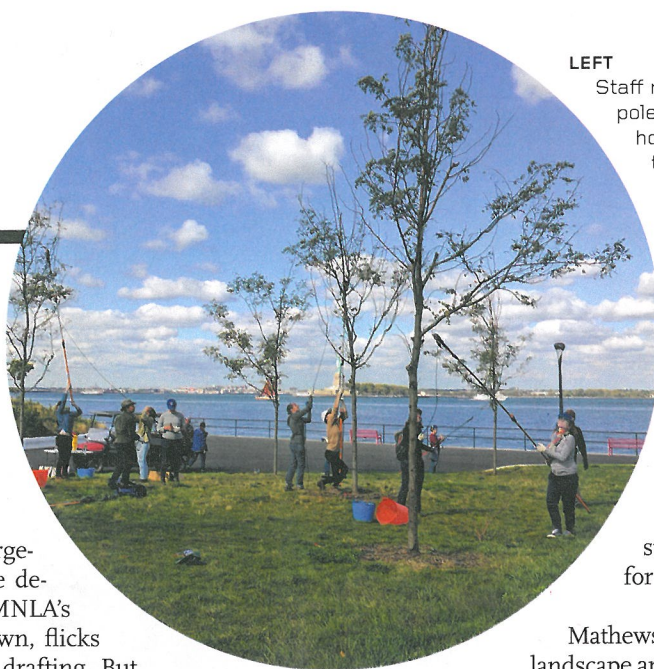
BY JANE MARGOLIES

Most workdays Annie Bergelin, ASLA, a landscape designer, takes the subway to MNLA's office in Manhattan, sits down, flicks on her computer, and starts drafting. But on a recent Tuesday morning, she and several colleagues took the ferry to Governors Island, a former Coast Guard base in New York Harbor, and flexed a different set of muscles. Following instructions from the crew that maintains the island's public spaces, Bergelin and her peers pruned low branches on river birches near a playground to keep children from getting hurt, opening up a view corridor in the process. Then they tended to a grove of honey locust trees. "It was a nice reminder that when we're drawing things digitally, this—the space we want to create—is the ultimate goal," Bergelin says.

There is little data on the number of volunteer hours logged by landscape architects, though many professionals pitch in on their own, improving parks and community gardens. MNLA, formerly Mathews Nielsen Landscape Architects, however, tries to incorporate volunteer maintenance in the ongoing work of the firm, focusing on sites its staff members have designed. Kim Mathews, FASLA, a cofounder of the firm with Signe Nielsen, FASLA, says the efforts go beyond contributing to the common good: "It increases the staff's horticultural knowledge," she says.

The practice began about five years ago when MNLA's principals realized that recent graduates joining the firm knew less about plants—or at least plants of the Northeast, where the firm works—than their predecessors. Staff members wanted to know more, too. "We had people say to us in yearly reviews, 'I really want to learn more about planting design,'" Mathews says.

For a couple of years, staff members wrote a blog about plants, which led to field trips to sites that MNLA and other firms had designed. For the past three years, the firm has organized a



LEFT

Staff members use pole pruners on honey locust trees on Governors Island.

team of volunteers for New York State's annual I Love My Park Day, which takes place on a Saturday in May, working with members of the public at East River State Park, in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Over two years, they installed a garden they'd designed for a spot near the entry.

Mathews brushes off a question about landscape architects giving away their labor for free. "In New York City many of us want more public funding going to maintaining public parks. But the effort we do is so small compared to the great need. I don't think it takes away from us pushing for that need to be addressed." Besides, she continues, "on the days we work with the community, if anything it broadens the visibility of the profession. The community meets you, they understand you designed a native garden, and that gives you the opportunity of explaining what a pollinator garden is and how it's beneficial."

And volunteering can provide essential in-the-field experience, Mathews says. MNLA staffers who volunteered for the Governors Island outing—who were required to make up the morning by staying late or coming in on a weekend—got feedback on the landscape design, done in collaboration with West 8. During a break in the morning's labors, the landscape crew explained how they had needed to build maintenance paths through an afforestation area—"the kind of thing a designer might overlook," Mathews says. The crew also had difficulty finding valve boxes in meadows. Their solution: placing birdhouses at every location.

Volunteers acquired insights into maintenance challenges, and some also picked up practical skills. Bergelin, a certified arborist trained in using a hand pruner and hand saw, became acquainted with a pole pruner, necessary for cleaning out dead branches on honey locust trees that were struggling. Despite an aching neck, Bergelin found it hard to drag herself away when it was time to return to Manhattan. But she says she'll be back. "I didn't work on this project when it was being designed, but now I have my own sense of ownership," she says. "I'm curious to check on those trees next year." ●