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# 10

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## Andy Lipkis: Plant Life

It's busy being green. Getting ahold of TreePeople president and founder Andy Lipkis on the eve of Earth Day's 40th anniversary proved to be as challenging as getting my 5-year-old to eat salad. Success – on both counts. (But the guru of citizen forestry didn't require gobs of ranch dressing.)

Lipkis, the married father of two, was a kid himself in 1970 when, while attending summer camp in the San Bernardino Mountains, he learned that smog was killing the forest. He and two-dozen fellow campers got to work tearing out an unused parking lot and replacing asphalt with smog-tolerant seedlings.

And TreePeople, the 37-year-old organization that summer-camp sojourn inspired, has planted 2 million trees and educated an equal number of kids to date – reaching a level of accomplishment that “humbles and inspires me,” says Lipkis. He's quick to share credit.

“The people, neighborhoods, communities, schools and businesses who make our work possible also get to own our success. We'd be nowhere without them.”

### You were 18 when you founded TreePeople. How does a college freshman end up starting an environmental organization?

I was an environmental studies major at Sonoma State. I heard that the California Department of Forestry had 20,000 sugar-pine seedlings that were going to be cast aside and mowed under. I was horrified! State law prohibited them from giving trees away. The seedlings cost two-and-a-half cents each, and I wanted them all. The *Los Angeles Times* wrote an article about my struggle – suddenly

envelopes with cash and checks started arriving at my parents' house. Many contributors were L.A. children who sent in 50 cents or a dollar. We were able to raise \$10,000. I had to create a nonprofit organization to manage the funds. We called it the California Conservation Project, but it later evolved into TreePeople.

### Did your parents support your efforts?

They always encouraged me to do my best and not accept “no” as a first answer. When I ran into a problem, they asked, “How are you going to solve that?” and listened patiently to my reply. They lent their kitchen table as we sorted through the mail bags with donation letters, my mom fed my friends and, most of all, my parents trusted and believed in me. Even though I was a teenager, they treated me and my vision for a better world with respect.

### What activities and opportunities does TreePeople offer for children?

We have many activities for kids and families! Our Eco-tour program is for kindergarten to fifth graders, and we have a Campus Forestry program that helps bring trees to L.A. County school campuses. There are weekend tree planting and tree care events that are fun volunteer outings for the family. Or even a simple walk in our Coldwater Canyon Park headquarters. Visit our online calendar of events at [www.treep-people.org](http://www.treep-people.org) and see what might be a good fit.

### What type of tree is your favorite? (Come on, you must have one!)

I really, really like the redwood tree. Their *seeds* are among the *smallest* of any known and yet the tree can grow to hundreds of feet tall. To me, this symbolizes the power and potency of our individual actions – no matter how small – for good in the world. I never dreamt that the first small seedling I planted as a kid at summer camp would be the start of TreePeople. ♦

Vivien Santana Hughes is a former *L.A. Parent* editor and the mother of three – two sons in college and (surprise!) a 5-year-old daughter. She lives with her patient husband of 26 years in La Cañada-Flintridge.

Who would you like to see profiled in Chat Room? Please email your suggestions to: [Christina.Elston@parenthood.com](mailto:Christina.Elston@parenthood.com).



TreePeople president and founder Andy Lipkis takes a break at the office – their yurt-village headquarters in 45-acre Coldwater Canyon Park – with dog, Scarlett.

PHOTO: MELINDA KELLEY