

## **Celebrating Our Copper Beech ElementTree – *submitted by Abington School District***

Copper Beech Elementary School opened its doors 20 years ago and was named after the old Copper Beech tree that sat on its property for more than a century. Copper Beech Elementary was built to serve the students of Glenside, PA, in Abington School District, an area where generations of families have attended Abington schools, and thus, many had a particular fondness of, or emotional attachment to, the Copper Beech tree and its long legacy in the neighborhood.

For several years, however, the health of the Copper Beech tree continued to decline, despite the District's and the local Shade Commission's best efforts to try to save it. District administrators and Copper Beech Elementary staff knew it was only a matter of time before they would have to make the heartbreaking decision to remove the tree before it became a hazard to passersby; with that decision would be the even more difficult task of informing the school's students and the Glenside community as a whole.

In the spring of 2021 when it was evident that new growth had not developed on the Copper Beech tree as the District's contracted arborists had hoped, it was decided that the tree would be removed out of potential safety concerns. Before cutting the tree down, however, the District needed a communications plan on how to inform the school and broader community of this sad news, and with that, make sure that people understood the extensive efforts that were undertaken to save the tree so that the District could get ahead of any potential rumors or misinformation. Further, this communications plan needed to include a campaign for students to commemorate the life of the tree and ensure its legacy continued.

- Planning
  - Initial planning began with key stakeholders ([plan here](#)):
    - District administrators, including the Communications Coordinator and Director of Facilities
    - Copper Beech Elementary administrators, including the School Principal and Elementary Curriculum Specialist
    - The local Shade Tree Commission who was invested in preserving the tree and would want to be part of future plans
  - Research included:
    - Looking up the history of the tree through locals and archives
    - Outreach to the local Shade Tree Commission for insight
    - Background research on the species of tree, what causes trees to die, etc.
    - Reviewing local and national media coverage about how other schools or towns have commemorated the life of a historical tree
  - Goals included:
    - Delivering the sad news of the tree needing to be removed
    - Warding off possible misinformation about how the tree was cared for
    - Educating students about the importance of tree preservation and upcycling
    - Identifying ways the students could properly celebrate the life of the tree and continue its legacy
  - Theme:
    - Celebrating our Copper Beech "ElementTree"
- Tactics and Timing

- Earth Day (Thursday, April 22, 2021) – Announce the need to remove the tree and the campaign to celebrate its life. This gave those who felt connected to the tree and its history a week’s notice so they could stop by to say goodbye.
  - The District used the following tactics:
    - [News release](#) that was sent to local outlets and posted to the District website, accompanied by a several-year old photo of the tree when it was in a healthier state
    - Designing a [banner](#) for social media use, which was also [printed and erected on the front lawn of the school](#) to inform passersby of what was happening
      - Example of social media announcement:  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CN-HQRVDiPI>
    - [Letter from the school principal](#) to Copper Beech Elementary families
    - Developing an [FAQ](#) with background on the tree, why its health declined, and how the District attempted to save it
    - Personally informing key stakeholders of the news via email/phone, including parents/guardians who had inquired about its health and teachers/staff members who were present when the school opened its doors
      - For those who previously expressed interest in helping to save the tree, the District asked if they could help spread the word and identify a woodworker who could assist the school in finding ways to repurpose the old tree wood.
- Tree Removal Day (Wednesday, April 28, 2021)
  - For logistical and safety reasons, the tree, which was located adjacent to the bus loop, had to be removed on a day when students were not in school. As Wednesdays were asynchronous remote instructional days, it was a fitting time to take the tree down and prep the ground for planting a new tree.
    - Example of social media post commemorating the life of the tree:  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/COQyb0FDCTW/>
- Arbor Day (Friday, April 30, 2021) – Kicking off a week-long Arbor Day / Copper Beech ElemenTree celebration with students
  - **Virtual assembly** (due to COVID restrictions)
    - The District invited representatives from local nonprofit, Briar Bush Nature Center, to provide an educational component about the lifespan of a tree; conservation and preservation; the European Copper Beech tree species, specifically; and how we can repurpose wood to give it new life (“upcycling”).
    - To stress the importance of upcycling, at the end of the assembly, the school’s art teacher announced an **art contest** inviting students to design ways Copper Beech Elementary School could repurpose the old beechwood. The teacher shared ideas like benches, bookshelves, sculptures, etc., and explained that the winning students would get to see their designs brought to life.

- Other **tree-themed educational activities** were observed in the school throughout the week following Arbor Day, such as a reading display in the library with books about trees.
  - One week after Arbor Day (Friday, May 7, 2021) – Tree planting
    - **A new European Copper Beech Tree was planted** in front of the school to provide shade to future generations of students, just like the old tree did
    - Attendees
      - Two students from each grade level (K-6) were identified to assist in the tree planting
      - The Copper Beech principal and ASD Superintendent also joined the students in properly planting the tree, with the help of the District’s contracted tree service
      - Involved community members and staff members were personally invited to attend
      - The Copper Beech PTO, as well as the Abington Shade Tree Commission were invited
    - Event photos were posted to social media: <https://www.instagram.com/p/COIN3YLD8n2/>
  - ‘Love a Tree Day’ (celebrated on May 16, but observed at Copper Beech on Friday, May 21, 2021)
    - Art teachers identified [three semifinalists](#) for the art contest, with the District superintendent and assistant superintendent weighing in on a final winner. The winners were announced via the school’s PA system by the principal.
    - All three semifinalists received a prize, in addition to having their names announced to the school. The top two winners will see their creations come to life as upcycled pieces.
      - First Place: A cougar sculpture (the school’s mascot) that could be enjoyed on the school grounds or inside the building
      - Second Place: Circular signs for classrooms around the building
      - Honorable Mention: A bench for the school
  - Arbor Day 2022 (Friday, April 29, 2022)
    - A woodworker is still developing the sculpture and signs ([sketch here](#)), but the plan is to reveal the creations on Arbor Day 2022 with many of the same key stakeholders
      - There will be an additional social media push at that time, along with local media outreach
- Results: The “Celebrating Our Copper Beech ElemenTree” was a huge success
  - Overwhelmingly, families and the community thanked the District for putting in efforts to not only save the tree all those years, but finding ways for students to honor its life
  - Concerns following the announcement were minimal
  - In a year where there were not a lot of big, exciting events due to COVID, this was a bright spot within the school community (students, teachers/staff) and on social media (for the broader community)

- Local outlets covered the tree planting, and included much of the campaign's key messaging:
  - [6abc Action News](#)
  - [The Reporter](#)
- The campaign is providing an ongoing boost in 2022 when the students will get to see their designs come to life when the cougar statue is unveiled in the main lobby of the building
- The newly planted Copper Beech tree now sits on the front lawn of the school where it can grow for another century and be enjoyed by the entire community