

Volunteers pitch in to count city's trees

By Alisa Opar

As census takers, Donna Krasniqi and Debbie Collins are outfitted a bit unconventionally. They dress for the weather, and during their rounds on Sunday the sisters wore tank tops, shorts and sandals. Both were armed with clipboards, though Ms. Collins spent most of her time using a tape measure. Ms. Krasniqi filled in the blanks on the census sheet, but the questions had nothing to do with age, sex or income. That's because these ladies are interested in trees, not people.

The Riverdalians are two of 1,136 volunteers taking part in a citywide street tree census, now at its halfway mark. Volunteers have reported surveying 44,545 trees since May. That's about 10 percent of the 498,470

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Photo by Siobhan Egan

DONNA KRASNIQI, left, and her sister, Debbie Collins, measure the diameter of a tree on West 254th Street near Broadway. They are counting every tree within 15 feet of the curb in portions of North Riverdale.

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trees recorded in the first tree census, taken in 1995, said Dana Rubenstein, a spokeswoman for the city Parks Department. The survey is expected to go until the end of September, when trees begin losing their leaves and are more difficult to identify.

Ms. Krasniqi first considered volunteering when she read about the tree census in *The Riverdale Press*. Soon after she saw another article on the tree count in the *Daily News*, and then a friend who works for the Parks Department encouraged her to participate. "There were so many signs that I should do this, I just had to sign up," Ms. Krasniqi, 44, said. She had little trouble convincing her sister, 42, to help out. "We have a good time every time we go outside," she said. "And it's really best to work as a team because one person can record while the other person takes measurements."

The two women have perfected their system for surveying. They meet once a week, at 10:30 a.m. on Sunday mornings and stay out for a couple of hours, recording the species, diameter and health of each tree within 15 feet of the curb.

Keen observers

They also note the condition of the sidewalk and whether there are any wires above the trees, and keep an eye out for the tree-killing Asian long-horned beetle, which

hasn't yet appeared in the Bronx. They're working their way through Ms. Krasniqi's zone first, which extends from 254th Street to 260th Street, and west from Broadway to Fieldston Road. Each volunteer is assigned a zone consisting of about 350 trees, Ms. Krasniqi said. Once they finish her zone, in which they've recorded more than 250 trees, they'll move on to Ms. Collins' zone near the Jerome Park Reservoir.

As the sisters approached the first tree of the morning on the corner of Broadway and 254th Street, Ms. Collins pulled out her tape measure.

"The diameter is 10 inches," Ms. Collins said, and then took a step back to look at the leaves.

'Is it rigid?'

"These are opposite," she said, holding a branch with long, oval leaves in her hand, noting that the leaf stems were directly across from each other, instead of staggered on the branch.

"Is it rigid?" Ms. Krasniqi asked. "Is it an American elm?"

"Hmm," said Ms. Collins, looking at an identification chart. "These leaves are pointy. It's a green ash," she said confidently, and the two moved on to the next tree.

The women quickly identified several more trees, including green ash, Norway maple and honey locust. Every once in a

while, they encounter a tree that's more difficult to identify.

"We get excited when we find a new one," Ms. Krasniqi said, recalling the time they found a golden rain tree.

"And then there was the tulip tree," Ms. Collins said. "We were like, 'Oh my God we found a new species!'"

Meeting people

The sisters also enjoy interacting with homeowners and passersby, and joke that though they meet a lot of people, they haven't met a lot of eligible men. Most people are curious about what they're doing poking around outside their house, they said.

"One day, Debbie has her arms around a big giant tree and some guy pokes his head out his door and says, 'You know, I've heard the expression, but I've never actually seen a tree hugger.'"

Often, people ask what kind of tree lives in front of their house, or express concerns about broken branches or choking wires. The sisters instruct people to call 311, but their volunteer experience has instilled in them a desire to be more active with the upkeep of city trees.

After the census is over, the women plan to be trained as citizen pruners.

For today, though, they're not overreaching. "We'll do this for another hour, and then go in my pool," Ms. Krasniqi said.