

Rooting for change: Climate-focused pep rally brings Maryvale community together

A celebration of shade brought together artists, academics, scientists, city officials and residents to turn climate action into a community-powered event of joy and purpose

By Marshall Terrill , ASU News
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This past weekend in the West Phoenix community of Maryvale, a brass band blared, Maryvale High School cheerleaders and a theater troupe fired up the crowd, and a pair of young trees rolled through the celebration on a cart, pulled by a miniature horse that was welcomed like a hometown hero.

This was not a football game.

It was a pep rally — for trees.

Modeled after a high school homecoming, the [Maryvale Pep Rally for Trees](#) was equal parts spectacle and strategy, a celebration of shade in one of Phoenix's hottest neighborhoods. The April 11 event brought together artists, academics, scientists, city officials and residents in a way that felt, at first glance, almost whimsical. But beneath the chants and costumes was a serious effort to confront extreme heat, and to do it together.

For [Amanda Lovelee](#), the Minneapolis-based artist behind the national “homecoming” project, the idea is simple: If people can cheer for sports, they can cheer for the planet.

“As an environmental artist, I’ve been doing this project across the country, using the framework of a homecoming football game to cheer for climate issues,” Lovelee said. “If you can cheer for a football team, why can’t we cheer for a tree or a river?”

Lovelee’s approach leans into joy as a deliberate choice in a field often dominated by urgency and fear.

“This isn’t a climate march,” she said. “It’s a pep rally and a parade to talk about shade and trees. How do we use joy and play to talk about climate and unite people into action?”

That spirit of joy is what first drew [Johanna Taylor](#) into the project. Taylor, an associate professor in [The Design School](#) at Arizona State University, had long collaborated with Lovelee and saw an opportunity to bring her work to Phoenix where the stakes are literally life and death.

“In Phoenix, we recently beat the record to 105 degrees by a month,” Taylor said. “That’s a lot. It’s scary.”

For Taylor, the pep rally is about more than celebration. It’s about creating space to process that shared anxiety.

“In this time where climate anxiety is real, we need space to acknowledge it and come together,” she said. “How do we navigate that through joy? How do we celebrate civic partners and recognize the work being done?”

What began as a modest idea quickly grew.

“I feel like the ‘alphabet soup’ of partners is indicative of the level of community buy-in,” Taylor said. “It’s ballooned in a way that was completely unexpected. People want to be part of it.”

That buy-in is especially meaningful in Maryvale, a community with some of the city’s lowest tree canopy coverage — and some of its highest temperatures.

“Maryvale is definitely one of the hottest areas of Phoenix,” said Lora Martens, the city’s urban tree program manager. “It has the lowest tree canopy coverage. It hits all the bad things that we like to mitigate with trees.”

Martens has spent years working in the neighborhood, helping lead a city program that provides free trees to residents. In just the past two weeks, nearly 200 trees were planted in a single neighborhood effort, part of a broader push that has already added thousands more across Phoenix.

But for Martens, who is also an alum of The Design School at ASU, the work goes beyond planting.

“One of our biggest goals was to connect people with their neighbors,” she said. “The trees are important, but equally as important is community building.”

That focus on connection is echoed in the work of ASU’s [Paul Coseo](#), an associate professor of landscape architecture and a sustainability scientist who helped organize community workshops in Maryvale leading up to the event.

“We’re really trying to understand what communities want in terms of their urban forest,” Coseo said. “What is the purpose of tree planting? Where should trees go?”

In those workshops, residents placed dots on maps to identify where shade is most needed, turning lived experience into data that can guide city planning.

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"It's about translating science into actionable steps that improve people's lives," Coseo said.

The pep rally, he added, provides something often missing from that work.

"A time to reflect, a time to celebrate and a time to get people excited," Coseo said.

That celebration was made possible by [Create the Change](#), an ASU initiative housed in the [Julie Ann Wrigley Global Futures Laboratory](#). The initiative funds projects blending humanities, science and community engagement.

"We are funding projects that foreground the human dimensions of environmental crises," said [Sally Kitch](#), a University and Regents Professor at ASU and the program's principal investigator.

"Our science is not working until we have social and cultural acceptance of the problem."

Kitch views the pep rally as a model for how to bridge that gap.

"It creates a narrative about collective action," she said. "It brings youth, community agencies and local government together in a creative, celebratory approach."

For city of Phoenix [Councilmember Betty Guardado](#), whose district includes Maryvale, that kind of collaboration is essential. Her office helped integrate the pep rally into the existing Maryvale Mercado, a monthly community gathering, ensuring the event reaches the people it's meant to serve.

"In this area, we've planted close to a thousand trees," said Guardado, who was elected in 2019 and represents approximately 400,000 residents. "We're very excited for everything that everyone has done for this partnership from all the different groups."

And for residents, the result offers something rare: a chance to celebrate progress in a fight that can often feel overwhelming.

"People talk about needing more trees, shade, heat mitigation strategies," said [David Hondula](#), Phoenix's director of heat response and mitigation and an associate professor at ASU's [School of Geographical Sciences and Urban Planning](#). "Why not celebrate when we're able to make progress?"

Back at the pep rally, that progress took center stage, complete with banners, vendors, performances and handmade pennants cheering for trees.

For Lovelee, that's the point.

"We need joy and play in this complex moment," she said. "It's not going to happen with shame. Small moments of joy add up."

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Associate Professor David Hondula (right, standing), director of heat response and mitigation for the city of Phoenix, leads a parade alongside Edell and Glen Washburn, owners of Blaze the miniature horse, who is pulling two small trees at the Maryvale Pep Rally for Trees on Saturday, April 11. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)



Maryvale High School cheerleaders and theater troupe members take part in the Maryvale Pep Rally for Trees, a homecoming-style community celebration for a tree-planting initiative in the West Phoenix community that has some of the city's lowest tree canopy coverage. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News



Edell Washburn loads a desert willow tree into the back of a miniature train at the Maryvale Pep Rally for Trees. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News



Minneapolis-based environmental artist Amanda Lovelee, leader of a national public art initiative for climate engagement, places a small banner in a desert willow tree pot at the Maryvale Pep Rally for Trees. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Gallery



Associate Professor Paul Coseo wears the event's button and a T-shirt featuring one of the sponsors at the Maryvale Pep Rally for Trees.



Event organizers placed small flags with messaging about trees and shade around the Maryvale Pep Rally for Trees event.



A.J. Calderon, 4, and his sister Xemena, 3, join folklórico dancers from the Fiesta Mexicana Dance Company at the Maryvale Pep Rally for Trees.



Members of the Bad Cactus Brass Band enjoy themselves as they march at the Maryvale Pep Rally for Trees.