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Divine Word priest brings forest back

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By TODD SHIELDS tshields@pioneerlocal.com

The priest with the quick, hearty laugh was eager to show the 39,000 sapling trees he has planted at Techny's Society of the Divine Word in Northbrook.

A modern-day Johnny Appleseed, who also was a missionary, Father Sunny Francis has not lost a bud of interest since 2006 in reforesting a 40-acre grassy plot at Divine Word, the 134-year-old Catholic missionary order at 1985 Waukegan Road.

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Father Sunny Francis rides a tractor Tuesday at the Society of Divine Word in Northbrook. Father Francis is planting thousands of trees over the next few years as a conservation project on the Techny grounds. (Allison Williams/Staff Photographer)

Francis started cultivating mostly hardwoods after convincing the Illinois Department of Natural Resources to donate 40,000 trees.

He hoped to complete his project this warm season or next.

"At first the Illinois Department wouldn't return my phone calls. I had to convince them, and now they call me and deliver the trees," said Sunny, who represented Society of the Divine Word in 2008 at the United Nation's Framework Convention on Climate Change in Poznan, Poland.

Born in Kerala, India, Francis became a Divine Word member in 1982 and served the order as a teacher and priest in Bombay, India and the Philippines.

He currently serves as Society of Divine Word Charitable Gift Annuity program.

He also works nearly seven days a week with the trees.

"The 40 acres for years was no longer farmed for food, so why not utilize the land in another way?" he said. "In my opinion, maybe the trees can be used for timber in 40 or 50 years."

Yet, harvesting the woody perennials -- oak, ash, pine, walnut, cypress, red gum, hickory, hackberry, red bud and Kentucky coffee tree -- was not Francis' main reason for undertaking the project.

"Taking care of the environment is one of our missions here at Techny.



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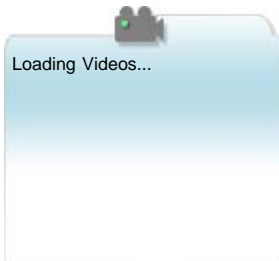
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I believe in the spirituality of nature and God's creation is something to preserve," said Francis, 50.

On a recent afternoon, the whir of a handheld planting auger and roar of Francis' blue Ford tractor could be heard across rows and rows of 20-inch saplings; a crew of five men helped Francis, and conservation-minded volunteers from Northbrook and Glenview also tend to the trees.

Francis expected to lose "thousands of trees or about 20 percent" to disease, drought and/or grazing animals, but an underground water system should help them survive, he explained, adding fertilizers were not used.

"We tried using deer repellent, but it didn't work," he said.

The 40-acre tract was surrounded by white clover, yellow dandelion and purple creeping Charlie, while shrub hedgerows and mature willow, maple, white birch and elm trees stood as borders, separating the remaining 158 acres of undeveloped Techny land.

The stone grotto, Blessed Mother Our Lady of Lourdes, remained at the southern end.

Four very active beehives were placed around the acreage, and deer, coyote, hawks, Canada geese, mallard ducks and redwing blackbirds were common sightings, similar to a wildlife sanctuary, Francis said.

"Three coyotes follow my tractor because it scares up voles and mice for them to eat. The male coyote is my friend. Hawks fly overhead, too.

"This is such a blessing to be out here, so peaceful. I never feel tired of working this land," he said.

Apart from the saplings project, new trees have not been planted around the Techny grounds for 15 years, Francis said, adding he will soon install 25 trees of several varieties.

"It's the cycle of life. Something for future generations to enjoy," he said.

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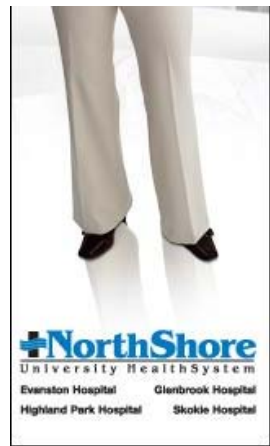
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