Quincy Hermann, 3, gets ready to plant his tree in his backyard. (Photo by Christine Ferraro)

Last month, Mark Hermann and his 3-year old son, Quincy, planted a young serviceberry tree in their backyard in Harlem.

“The tree and he were no bigger than each other,” said Christine Ferraro, 41, Quincy’s mother. “We’ve been trying to get trees on our block and it’s not very easy.”

When Hurricane Sandy hit, the first thing they did at their house on West 131st Street was to check their newly planted shrub. Luckily, “the little guy was unharmed,” said Ferraro. The young plant will eventually grow into an ornamental tree with white flowers.

Uptown community groups are working to curb high asthma rates and air pollution in the area by planting more trees to improve the environment.

West Harlem Environmental Action Inc. (WE ACT) recently gave away 100 trees to Harlem neighborhoods to increase greenery in Upper Manhattan. Trees absorb many of the harmful chemicals in the air, and prevent soil erosion and flooding.
“There aren’t enough trees in northern Manhattan,” said Dianna Kim, coordinator of the tree giveaway. Manhattan has only eight percent of the street trees in New York City’s five boroughs, according to the Department of Parks and Recreation.

WE ACT ran the project in partnership with the Million Trees NYC initiative, part of Mayor Bloomberg’s PlaNYC. Million Trees wants to increase trees in New York by 20 percent over the next decade.

Air pollution is a serious concern in upper Manhattan, where asthma rates are a chronic health problem.

Upper Manhattan has more than double the rate of asthma hospitalizations than the rest of Manhattan, according to the New York City Department of Health. For children under 4, the average rate is 112.1 per every 10,000, compared to 54.4 for Manhattan as a whole. The risk of asthma is highest before 5 years old.

The causes of asthma are complex. “If air quality is the only factor, the asthma rate should be the same throughout the city,” said Ogonnaya Newman, director of environmental health at WE ACT. But other triggers are evident, Newman said, including housing quality, access to health care and community stresses, such as violence.

“It is difficult to pinpoint specific triggers based on a certain location or neighborhood,” said Courtnee Watson-Walke, a spokesperson for the Department of Health, in an email to The Uptowner.

There is also an ethnic component to the crisis. African American and Latinos account for 80 percent of all asthma cases in New York City, according to the Columbia Center for Children’s Environmental Health.

The center cites pests such as cockroaches in homes, air pollution from fuel burning and second-hand smoke as important contributors to asthma. Automobiles release substances called PAHs into the atmosphere, which causes numerous health problems.

Planting trees is one way to reduce the effects of air pollution.

WE ACT organized the giveaway. Members of the public were able to reserve trees online or by phone, then pick them up at the Senior Citizens Sculpture Garden Park on West 153rd Street. They could plant them in a location of their choice.

Three types of trees were available — the serviceberry, hazelnut and persimmon, all native to the New York area.

WE ACT is also involved in a number of other environmental projects in Upper Manhattan. The organization stopped the 135th Street Marine Waste Transfer station from reopening, ensuring that 320 diesel garbage trucks would not enter the area each day.
Recently, they have been helping to get people in the community the information they need to understand how to deal with asthma, “translating” the work of other organizations “into plain English,” said Newman.

The last comprehensive study by the Department of Health, which looked at asthma rates between 2001 and 2008, showed that approximately 70 percent of asthma hospitalizations in Manhattan children under 15 occurred in Upper Manhattan.

Although trends show that the overall rate of asthma has declined sharply, upper Manhattan continues to bear the brunt of the cases. “It’s still a big problem,” said Kim.