



TIM LAMORTE/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Haifa Blint-Kadi and Thali Zikos restore the Medusa mosaic inside the Temple of the Sky on June 9 (above) and June 10 (below). For additional photos, see page 20.

Love stories spur resurrection of landmark gardens

By Jackie Lupu

YONKERS — Whoever coined the phrase “a labor of love” could have been describing Untermyer Gardens, which is celebrating its 100th anniversary. 2016 is also the sixth year of its reincarnation under the stewardship of the Untermyer Gardens Conservancy.

Millionaire attorney Samuel Untermyer commissioned William Welles Bosworth to design what he envisioned as the most spectacular garden in America. Untermyer adored his gardens so much that he built 60 greenhouses and employed 60 gardeners.

A century later, love is still in the air at Untermyer Gardens. Stephen Byrns, a former New York City Landmarks



Preservation commissioner who was a partner at BSKS Architects in Manhattan and a trustee at Wave Hill in the Bronx, is besotted with the 28 acres he has helped coax back to glorious life. When he established the Conservancy in 2010 as a public-private partnership with the gardens’ owner, the City of Yonkers, the plantings were few, the monuments and mosaics had deteriorated, and the ornamental waterworks were broken or buried under impenetrable layers of vines. But Byrns knew what the property had been, and what it could be again. He convinced Marco Polo Stufano, who had designed the restoration of Wave Hill, to come out of retirement to create a restoration plan for Untermyer. Byrns also tapped

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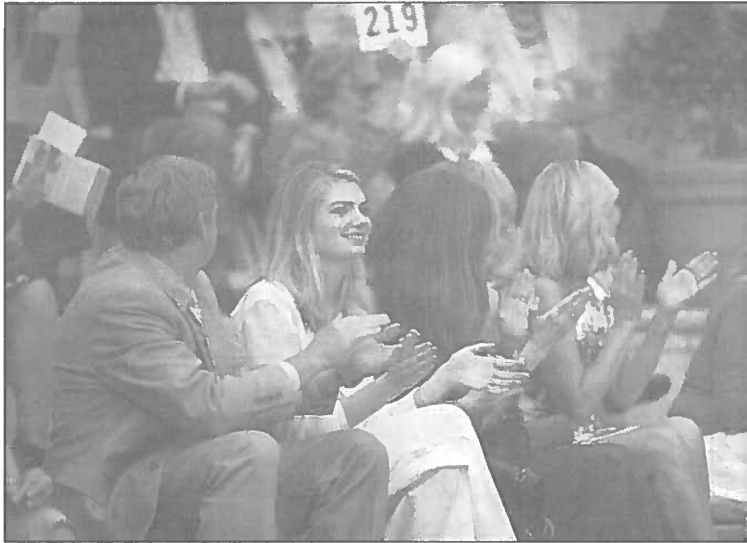
Wave Hill gardener Timothy Tilghman to become Untermyer's first full-time gardener.

At the Conservancy's June 16 fundraising gala, Byrns called the rejuvenated walled garden "the finest Persian garden in the Western Hemisphere." His statement was not hyperbole; since the restoration it has received international publicity. Byrns estimated that 50,000 people visited last year. On summer weekends, bridal parties seem to stack up like planes on the runway, waiting to be photographed against a backdrop of blooming flowers and classical stonework.

This year, Byrns retired from his architectural firm to take on the full-time job of president of the Untermyer Gardens Conservancy. Ann Carmel, the great-great-granddaughter of Samuel Untermyer, has taken over from Byrns as chair of the Conservancy's board of directors.

Byrns is a natural at nonprofit development, comfortable with leveraging his contacts in the horticultural and design world for the benefit of the gardens. Barbara Israel, a noted dealer in garden antiques, is on the Untermyer board, and domestic doyenne Martha Stewart, who featured the garden in her magazine and online, is among Untermyer's famous supporters. But the gardens also depend upon the financial largesse of Westchester residents, many from the Rivertowns.

These fundraising efforts enabled the Conservancy to hire a third full-time gardener, Drew Schuyler, who will be joining Tilghman and gardener Jessica Norman on July 1. "Together with our three seasonal gardeners, that makes six



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Model Kate Upton applauds during the Untermyer Gardens Conservancy's gala on June 16.

gardeners in six years," Byrns said. Stufano continues to serve as their horticultural consultant.

This year's most ambitious project is also all about romance: the restoration of the spectacular Temple of Love, a circular columned gazebo set upon man-made rock outcroppings to afford a view of the Hudson River. There's a human love connection here too: former Yonkers Mayor Angelo Martinelli paid for much of the restoration in memory of his late wife, Carol.

Many of the temple's masonry elements, including the cast stone columns, had to be replicated because they had deteriorated beyond repair. Conservancy workers and Yonkers officials on the scene one day in early spring held their breath as a crane slowly lifted the curlicue-patterned dome off

the temple's entablature.

"The wrought-iron dome hadn't been painted in 75 years," Byrns said. "We were nervous there wouldn't be enough metal left, but there was, so it was stripped, galvanized, and powder-coated. Where the curlicues come together, we had to put some new fasteners."

The dome received a coat of crisp black paint, and after a slight delay — two of the brand-new cast-stone columns cracked during the temple's reassembly, and had to be remade — all the pieces were put back together again. The waterfalls that cascade down the temple's rocky base are now bubbling away as they did in Samuel Untermyer's day. Thanks to the deer fencing that now surrounds the property, the Conservancy's gardeners are able to plant flowers and more around the temple and in oth-

er locations on the property.

One such project has been the "Vista," a set of steps leading to a view of the river from an overlook that includes a pair of actual ancient Roman columns. "We're continuing our work on the Vista, which is probably three-quarters done," Byrns said. "We have to do remedial work on the stairs, the stone copings, the drainage, and then final planting."

Over the coming months, the Conservancy will stabilize the remnants of the gatehouse, covered in graffiti, on the property's western border. "We would like to keep it as a ruin and have a garden around it — have it be a 'ruin garden,'" Byrns said, noting that old-time millionaires liked to create artificial ruins on their estates. "When you looked at a ruin, you were supposed to think of mortality, the passage of time. We have our own, real ruin."

Even the ornamental tilework in the gardens can inspire strong emotions. Yonkers resident and mosaic artist Haifa Bint-Kadi of Groundwork Hudson Valley has been restoring the Medusa mosaic inside the Temple of the Sky, a columned folly on the west side of the walled garden. The mosaic had not been maintained for decades. It was crumbling in some places and missing large areas of tile in others.

"They need annual maintenance and repair, and that costs money, and fundraising has been an issue," she said, noting that since there are more funds, the gardens' stewards are "on the right track now."

Bint-Kadi was still at the Temple on the evening before the gala, preparing Medusa to meet the public. "I'll scrub everything and then seal it with a heavy-duty sealer, then it should be OK," she said. "I made it to last for a while — I'm committed to taking care of it." She added, "I've spent a month with Medusa now, and we've become friends."