



TIM LAMORTE/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

## Interns plant homage to Untermyer's garden legacy

By Jackie Lupo

YONKERS — At the hands of seven Yonkers student gardeners, a Rhododendron Walk was planted on the western side of Untermyer Gardens, where rhododendrons haven't grown for decades.

Over the summer, the teenaged crew worked among century-old oak trees to clear the hilly site of weeds, vines, and brush. More than 100 rhododendrons of various colors were planted in the area, and woodland plants will later be installed underneath them.

This is the first year the park, located in northern Yonkers, is hosting the student gardeners program, according to Stephen Byrnes, president of the Untermyer Gardens Conservancy. The internship is sponsored

by YPIE (Yonkers Partners in Education), a nonprofit organization that mentors students to prepare them for success in college. Funding is provided by the Carvel Foundation, the Saint Faith's Foundation, and the Westchester Community Fund. The students worked four days a week and were paid minimum wage.

"They're great kids with sparkling eyes, a spring in their step, and smiles on their faces," Byrnes said. "And the weather's been brutal, even though there's some shade down there."

Five of the students are high school seniors, and the other two are college freshmen. Their apprenticeships began in early July, when Byrnes took them on a tour of the gardens and filled them in on its history. "Some of them brought their parents," he said. "This garden is part

of their heritage, and this is something to be proud of."

When the novice gardeners first looked at the site of the future garden on July 8, they were confronted by an impenetrable thicket of plants over 6 feet tall. "I was so shocked," said 17-year-old Carmen Barragan, a recent graduate of Riverside High School who entered Westchester Community College this fall.

"The vines they took off were invasives, like wisteria, wild grapevines, mugwort, and tree of heaven," said Liz Dreeban, one of Untermyer's professional gardeners. She worked beside the teens and taught them gardening techniques.

By Thursday, Aug. 23, the students were finishing the landscaping of the sloped area they had cleared. Grass was growing on the newly revealed

hillside. They were busy completing paths made of wood chips, and making a rustic staircase out of rounds taken from the trunk of an oak that had fallen on the property. They also built a staircase to allow visitors to access the site from above. Small red flags marked the positions where the new bushes, including standard rhododendrons and the smaller-leaved variety, commonly called azaleas, would be planted.

A century ago there were 150 acres making up Greystone, the estate owned by Samuel Untermyer. He was its third owner, and the one chiefly responsible for creating the spectacular gardens. According to a Better Homes & Gardens interview with the millionaire attorney in 1928, "The rhododendrons are among the chief glories of the place.

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There are 30,000 of them, spread practically throughout the estate."

Today, Untermyer Park, owned by the City of Yonkers and managed by the Untermyer Gardens Conservancy, is 43 acres (St. John's Riverside Hospital owns much of the rest), but the Conservancy has been working to recreate as many original features of the remaining property as it can. Since work began in 2012 with the resurrection of the walled Indo-Persian garden, the Conservancy has restored the Temple of Love, with rock gardens and cascading waterfall features, and renovated and replanted the Vista steps leading to a view of the Hudson. The new Rhododendron

Walk, though not on the scale of Untermyer's original plantings, is part of the Conservancy's ongoing project.

"I've always liked nature, ever since I was little," Barragan said. "When I heard about this, I said, 'Let me apply.' Just being outside now makes me feel like I can take over the world. That's what nature makes me feel like."

DJ James, a senior at Roosevelt High School and the only male in the group, said his favorite part of the job had been "the heavy-lifting stuff I had to do, like taking out trees."

Princess Unita Obi, a senior at Yonkers High School, said, "My experience here is very great. I'm learning things every day, from what the ground is made of, how to make beds, use wood chips to make a trail, how to plant... and of course, how to work in the heat." Dreeban said the team took frequent

water breaks. "Carmen's mom makes us lemonade every day," she added.

Natasha Rodriguez, also a senior at Yonkers High School, said, "I knew it would be hard. That's kind of one of the reasons I decided to join. Liz makes us very confident and comfortable."

Gardening at the level required for this job was new to the students, none with gardening experience beyond houseplants or small garden plots. Because they were working in a long-neglected area, there were surprises. One student had a mild case of poison ivy; Dreeban was stung by an insect. They also encountered some interesting wildlife. "We saw a Luna moth caterpillar, a Monarch caterpillar, a couple of garden snakes, and a mole," Dreeban said.

"I'm glad they created this internship," Obi concluded. "It increases our appreciation of the environment."