Untermeyer celebrates four years of renaissance

By Jackie Lapp

YONKERS — Celebrations from the garden world mixed with local dignitaries and supporters on June 16 for the Untermeyer Gardens Conservancy’s third “Summer Solstice Soirée,” a fundraiser for the ongoing restoration of the ornamental gardens at the Villa Borghese.

The sun appeared on schedule after a day of rain, allowing more than 200 guests to enjoy the restored Villa Borghese Garden. Gardeners reinstituted its color schemes for the posting season, and the 9,000 yellow and magenta tulips that bloomed in April have given way to a motif of deep purple, lime green and yellow plants lining the cascading waterways representing the “rivers of life” in the Garden of Eden, a feature common to Persian gardens. Vivid orange is in the pool in front of the central amphitheater darte among purple and green water filis and purple iris growing from submerged plants arranged around bubbling fountains.

The gardens have undergone a miraculous transformation in a short time, driven by the vision and fundraising of the conservancy’s chairman, New York architect Stephen Byrns. A former member of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Committee and a former member of the Board of Trustees of the NYC Parks Foundation, Byrns, who joined the team in 2010, surveyed the ruins of what was once one of America’s most spectacular landscapes and decided to form a nonprofit to revitalize them.

“The gardens, located on a 45-acre tract of what was once "Graystone," the 150-acre estate of millionaire attorney and garden aficionado Samuel Untermeyer, is now a public park owned by the City of Yonkers. Byrns convinced Marco Polo Stufi, founding director of horticulture at Wave Hill, to come out of retirement and supervise the redesign of the gardens in the spirit of Italian architect Vincenzo Scamozzi, who designed the original layout for Untermeyer 100 years ago.

Last month, the Foundation for Landscape Studies presented its Place-Maker award to Byrns in a ceremony at the Boathouse in Central Park. The award was given to an individual who "has used design imagination and horticultural skill to create a garden or park of exceptional beauty."

Each day I am inspired by the great work being done here," Byrns said. "I call it miraculous." Byrns said 100 percent of the funds raised for the renovation have come from the private sector. In 2011, the conservancy raised $100,000; last year, donations totaled $300,000, and, Byrns added, "This year, I may raise a million." He said the conservancy spent only $1,800 last year on administration, which was limited to sundry office expenses.

The conservancy has two full-time gardeners, Timothy Tighman and Ieshia Norman, and three seasonal gardeners, whose salaries are paid by the City of Yonkers, but funded by the conservancy. They work with landscape staff from the City of Yonkers. Funds raised in 2014

The entrance to the Walled Garden

Moonlight illuminates the canal, which will be restored thanks to a $250,000 donation from Scenic Hudson.

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enabled the conservancy to install a deer fence, which will free the staff to expand their planting efforts from 3 acres in the Walled Garden to 30 acres.

A donation of $250,000 from Scenic Hudson, an organization devoted to protecting and restoring the Hudson River and its landscape, will be used to reliner and replumb the waterworks in the Walled Garden’s canal. The donation is being made in the memory of Kathyrn Wasserman Davis of Tarrytown, who died in 2013 at the age of 106 and was a longtime supporter of Scenic Hudson’s work in New York.

These are magnificent gardens with historical importance," said Neil Sullivan, president of Scenic Hudson. "We have a long history of partnership with the City of Yonkers, mostly along the waterfront, and we wanted to build on that to assist with this important initiative."

With a donation from Norwalk Speaks of Yonkers, The Vista, a grand staircase with a view of the Hudson framed by antique Roman columns, is being restored with the planting of 100 cyp- tismaria to resemble the cypresses found in the halls at the Villa D’Este leading to Lake Como in Italy. The Temple of Love, a wrought-iron-domed, colonned gazebo perched on rocks that form a man-made waterfall, will be restored with the help of a donation from former Yonkers Mayor Angelo Martellilli, in memory of his wife, Carol. Last year on "Mother’s Day," 6,000 people swarmed into the garden," said Byrns, who noted that many of those visitors originally came from faraway lands. "It seems that people from many nations can find themselves in the garden. Now women in saris and hijabs are strolling through!"

Domestic diva Martha Stewart of Bedford, who featured the garden in a video tour last fall, was the gala’s honorary chair. "This is a garden that is historic, meaningful, and a gem in the chaos that is New York," said Stewart, adding that her longtime friend and neighbor, Barbara Israel, a conservancy board member and garden benefactor, introduced her to Untermeyer Gardens.

Israel, this year’s gala honoree, was, as has become the custom at the Untermeyer gala, introduced to the audience with a theatrical flourish. To the strains of Wagner’s "Sailor’s Chorus" Israel was escorted through the garden to the amphitheater by two men dressed as Roman guards, and emerged as an Egyptian attendant carrying a large red pomegranate.

Israel, who owns Barbara Israel Garden Antiques in Katonah, is one of this country’s foremost experts on outdoor statuary and classical garden ornament. She has served as a consultant to the Metropolitan Museum, the Windsor Castle Museum and the Smithsonian, and is the author of "Antique Garden Ornaments: Two Centuries of American Taste," one of the definitive books on the subject.

"This garden is part of the groundswell of gardening that took place between 1895 and 1940, the golden age of American gardening," Israel said. "On October 30, 1939, 20,000 people came to visit this garden in one day."

A lively auction capped off the program. Over $20,000 was raised as bid- ders vied for such luxuries as a week in a palazzo in Umbria, a stay at the Wil- lows in Palm Springs (once Untermeyer’s winter vacation home), and a catered dinner for 20 at Byrns’ home in Riverdale, but for those who want a taste of the good life, admission to the Untermeyer Gardens is free.

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