

Her touch is alive in Brooklyn



IRENE VIRAG

I truly believe that we're all in our gardens, and our gardens are in all of us — that they reflect our sensibilities, our feelings, sometimes even our dreams. And so it made wonderful sense that the memorial service for Judith Daria Zuk took place in the Cherry Esplanade of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden.

It is a public garden, a people's garden — a place to stroll on an early summer day when roses blossom by the tens of thousands or on a breeze-kissed fall afternoon when the ginkgo trees are in golden bloom and the last pink water lilies wave to passersby. And to me, it is Judy's garden. She was the garden's fifth president — leading it to new glories with grace and elegance for more than 15 years, until her retirement in 2005.

Judy died last month. I wish I'd known her better, but I still think of her as my friend. I sought her out my first week on the job as a garden writer. I didn't know beans or very much else about horticulture, and she was the president of BBG. But it didn't matter — she took the time to walk around the garden with me and teach me in the process. That was Judy. Afterward, I never missed a chance to visit. There was always something new in the garden she wanted to tell me about.

And we came to share another bond. She was my sister in a sorority no one wants to pledge — the sisterhood of women

Coming Thursday

In Part 2, Garden Detective Jessica Damiano answers readers' letters with advice on overwintering tropicals and tender plants.



scarred by breast cancer. She called me when I was diagnosed. A few years later, it was my turn to call her. My scars healed. Hers didn't. Judy's cancer metastasized. She was only 55 when she died.

I returned to the garden a few weeks ago for the memorial service — or as the program described it more accurately — a celebration of her life. The day itself joined in as if Judy were backstage, energetic and funny, as vibrant as the costumes she loved — like the exotic getup she wore in the photo on the program cover. There were blue

skies and birdsong and roses and colchicums. Turtles basked on a rocky outcrop along the banks of the Japanese Hill-and-Pond Garden and swam among the koi. Banana trees shimmered with sunlight, goldenrod glistened, and the elephant ears seemed large enough to hear the earth cooling.

And people who loved and admired Judy came to the Cherry Esplanade on a cloudless day to celebrate her. Men wearing bow ties and no ties, and women wearing straw hats and no hats sat on wooden folding chairs in the sun, while others took refuge beneath the shade of the Japanese cherry trees — Prunus Kanzan — that turn the world pink in spring.

The speakers talked about an ever-young Jersey girl with amazingly blue eyes who found a home in Brooklyn and nurtured a 52-acre garden that grew from what was an ash heap more than a century ago. They talked about her many loves — flowers, butter, the Mets, shoe shopping and dancing.

Her successor, Scott Medbury, described her commitment not just to BBG but to the "greater garden of Brooklyn" by helping to establish educational and neighborhood projects. And something else that was essential Judy. Not many baseball fans may know this, but when the Brooklyn Dodgers turned traitors and left the borough, they also left the topsoil of Ebbets Field behind. Truckloads of the stuff wound up at the garden. Judy took



PHOTO BY LEEANN LAVIN

The plaza at Brooklyn Botanic Garden was named for Judy Zuk, who recently died of breast cancer.

advantage of this when baseball fan Bill Clinton visited the garden in 1997. She gave him a paper bag filled with "Dodger Dirt." It was a hit.

Her good friend Bill Thomas, executive director of Chanticleer garden in Wayne, Pa., described the graduate student with a big smile and shining chestnut hair he met more than

30 years ago at Longwood Gardens in Pennsylvania. They stayed buddies ever after, sharing laughter — and tears, too.

Judy loved to dance, and Bill is an expert. He said Judy loved music from Bruce Springsteen to opera. "Our duet of 'Don't Cry for Me Argentina' was infamous," he said. "And we'd dirty-dance to Abba." I've seen Bill dance. They must have been wonderful.

"We had many tearful dinners," Bill said. "When her marriage ended. When my partner left. We'd talk about how to deal with dating and how to deal with not dating; how to move on to a new job; how to keep control even when you're facing death. . . ."

This past July and August were peaceful. She wasn't in pain. She told me, 'I'm past fear — it is what it is.' Bill had promised not to cry, but for a second, he broke down. The sob

had its own eloquence.

Her lifelong friend Patricia Brown, who grew up with Judy in Irvington, N.J., told about the time they vacationed in the Caribbean and took Patricia's mother along.

"Judy loved to bring my mother a drink called 'Sex on the Beach.' She did it just so she could say, 'Would you like to have Sex on the Beach?'"

"Judy went into the garden with her summa cum laude degree," Patricia Brown said, "but she followed her heart to the top of her field."

If you'd like to meet Judy, you could visit the garden. Especially in spring, when the magnolias bloom. When Judy retired, the plaza in front of the Visitors Center was named for her. White star magnolias take the lime-light in March, and 17 other varieties follow. They open in ivory and pink and purple. One of them is golden yellow with a hint of plum at the base. It's called Magnolia Judy Zuk. It was named for the woman whose life was entwined with the garden that grows in Brooklyn.



BROOKLYN BOTANIC GARDEN PHOTO

Not only was Judy Zuk devoted to the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, she established educational and neighborhood projects in the borough.

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