

October 26, 2017

VIRGINIA ROBINSON GARDENS

20th Anniversary: Presentation by Timothy L. Lindsay

We've all had the experience, at one time or another, of visiting a place and immediately being seized by a powerful sense of connection, of thinking – wow, this is where I belong. This happened to me on my first visit to this estate by invitation from Ivo Hadjiev, Mrs. Robinson's last major domo.

In the spring of 1996, Ivo requested that I come over to the Virginia Robinson Gardens (VRG) from the LA County Arboretum, where I was employed as Assistant Superintendent, to offer a garden consultation. The Supervisor of the Gardens at that time had unfortunately been ill for several years. Consequently, the Gardens had fallen asleep...and into extensive disrepair. The Friends of Robinson Gardens were concerned about their upcoming annual Garden Tour and they needed help to prepare the gardens.

As a young man, I was not daunted by all that needed to be done to ready the garden for this premier event. Instead, I was enthralled by the balanced feel of the neo-classical architecture of the buildings and the scale of the interior of the house. The rooms were grand but not grandiose, a little bit like grandma's house. And, Ivo was someone I felt compelled to help, a person of great integrity and good intentions. It was clear he was still serving and defending the eloquence and memory of the estate's previous inhabitants, the Robinsons, along with the rich social history that played out here. I did not know then that this was the beginning of an incredible friendship and education about the "art of living" that would play out over 10 years.

Of course, I helped with Garden Tour, and during the process was introduced to many of the Friends members as we discussed plans, plants and budgets. I was immediately impressed with the Friends' level of interest and commitment to restore the estate, while expanding the number and types of public programs offered at the Gardens. Who could have predicted that I would have the distinct privilege of working with the Friends members for over 20 years and have collaborated with 13 different Friends Presidents? Many of them are here today. Past presidents, please stand and be recognized for your truly invaluable contributions to this institution.

I officially started work at VRG as Superintendent in February of 1997. Luckily for me, my youthful enthusiasm and generous dose of naiveness was a great buffer to what discoveries would come to light over the ensuing years. On the surface, the estate presented a sleepy serene environment, displaying Greco-Roman antiquities, with an old Hollywood overlay, and echoes of voices and conversations from grand parties past. Few people were aware that most buildings had no heat, or that all the roofs leaked, or even that the electrical system was on the brink of catastrophic failure, posing a serious threat of loss of life and property.

While it was clear to me the gardens had evolved over decades and strongly reflected the owners' personality, the original design intent was hardly detectible in some areas of the garden. Like a detective, I looked for clues on how to piece the garden back together. It needed to be refocused and brought back to its original design intent and former glory.

The hardscape was in a sorry state. Brick pathways in the Italian Terrace Garden (ITG) were not safe to transverse due to raised or missing bricks. Most of the retaining walls had failed in

large part. In fact, we had more things laying down than standing up and we had more artifacts in desperate need of repair than we had money to make repairs. But fortunately, we had abundant enthusiasm and energy that allowed us to overcome the real possibility that the estate and its century-old neo-classical structures and unique social history would become forever lost to the universal law of entropy. Or, worse still, its fate would be wholesale dismemberment and physical destruction, in the name of “subdividing and building multiple homes.”

Restoration work started cautiously and methodically. The first pressing project was to rebuild a 20-foot high retaining wall (that’s nearly two stories) that was about 600 yards long. The original retaining wall was, in large part, laying on the ground in the area we now call the employee parking lot. Making matters worse, the portion of the wall still standing threatened to collapse and fall into the neighbor’s yard below, potentially filling his swimming pool with broken concrete and demolishing his house. This potential liability was resolved by building collaborative relationships between Supervisor Yaroslavsky’s office, the Department of Parks and Recreation, the County Department of Public Works, and the State Department of Interior. Needless to say, I was immediately indoctrinated into the world of POLITICS! This project was completed after 8 months and three-quarters of a million dollars.

After surveying the 11 water features in the gardens, I determined that only one held water. The rest of them leaked, or had no source of water, and/or were missing multiple elements. For example, the three frog fountain in the ITG was down to just one lonely frog, which was used to replicate the other missing frogs. This restoration project was sponsored by the Friends. Currently, all water features now operate independently, each having a water source with automatic fill valves along with submergible pumps to operate the fountains on a timer. Today, the musical stairs, once again make music.

The County reroofed all the buildings and with Proposition A funds rebuilt the Palladian doors on the Pool Pavilion. The weight of all the glass (about 2000 lbs) in the doors caused the wood frames to sag, rendering the doors to be practically inoperable.

Most of the silk draperies in the house were hanging by just the treads and all the furniture upholstery was equally in need of refurbishment. The Friends identified the vendor in New York, who still had many of the Robinson’s original textile selections in their archives. And the fund raising began. Over a period of year they raised enough money to have new silk draperies reproduced with the exact pattern and even the same number of thread per square inch. This is indeed a textbook example of historic restoration.

This level of cooperation between a non-profit and the County is unique, if not rare. In fact, in our archives, we have a letter from President Ronald Reagan, written on Oval Office stationery. The Reagans were frequent guest here when it was the Robinson residence. The President’s letter reads: “This collaboration between the private and public sector is ‘exemplary’ and should be carried out to protect our national treasures across this great land.”

During my two decades at VRG, I’ve witnessed the expansion of public hours by 33%, after we fought for a decade to expand the EIRs, the document that regulates public access. We are now open six days a week instead of just four. I have seen the Friends group expand programing by 75% and now help educate over 2,000 children. During their docent-led tours of the garden, the children learn about eating healthy and how to grow a portion of their own food. Children from Title One schools arrive on buses paid for by grant monies solicited by the Friends.

I have hired additional county staff to help with the operations and we now have five gardening positions and three administrative positions to help maintain the gardens and book public tours, photo shoots, and special events. Our volunteer docents provide entertaining and informative narrative while leading public tours for over 3,000 visitors each year. And by using the gardens as an outdoor classroom in conjunction with our public outreach, we have been able to inform the community on how to garden in a more sustainable way, how to include food plants in the garden, and how to reduce water use in the landscape. What better way to grow and refine community?

Many thanks to all of you for your support and confidence that empower me to keep a singular vision, the one crafted by the Robinsons, and carry it forward in time, while working collaboratively with you to restore and preserve this historic estate. And thanks to my family for being patient and always supportive of my commitment to this special place, even if at times you rightfully declared "it's a bit excessive." Please stand up so we can recognize your indulgence of my second love.

Thank you all for coming; thank you everyone for your continued commitment to VRG, along with your latest effort to restore the King Palm Forest. This is a special day. I will always fondly remember this day and the many contributions you have made to the restoration and operations of this legendary estate.

And I would like to end with a quote from Walt Disney, a longtime friend of Virginia's. "Many hands and hearts and minds generally contribute to anyone's notable achievements."