

One Volunteer's Determination to Beautify Duncan Library: A Profile of Elaina Palincsar

The Duncan Library closed for renovations in June 2004. When it reopened in September 2005, little funding remained for any attention to the barren earth surrounding the renovated structure. The landscaping was literally off to a rocky start with the poor soil around the building full of debris, spare struggling plants and abundant weeds. For the past decade, FODL volunteer, Elaina Palincsar's goal has been to make the landscaping around the library a warm and welcoming invitation for the community to enter and enjoy. Dogged perseverance paid off; the library recently received a City of Alexandria Beautification Award for Phase One, the Commonwealth Avenue side of the library.

Library beautification has not been easy in an era of limited resources. To obtain permission to weed at first, Elaina had to write a proposal to the City and the Library Board. Because the library didn't have a Certificate of Occupancy for over three years, nothing permanent could be planted. Bulbs and annuals were allowed, so hundreds of daffodils, funded by Friends, were planted, chosen from four different varieties to extend the bloom season. Church groups, Scout troops, Friends, school groups and other interested parties were invited to participate. (Help, as always, then and now, is welcome!)

These plantings, and the others that were later permitted, all needed watering. Because the building's outside hose butts were initially inoperable, water was carried from the janitor's closet in watering cans loaded on book carts. This year an irrigation system was installed that serves all but a small part of the library borders making maintenance much easier, allowing for new areas to be planted when funds permit. Because the library has the City's first Green Roof and it's difficult to access, Friends and the City co-sponsored a Garden Roof Demonstration Garden which runs beside the Commonwealth Avenue entrance. It contains examples of the plants that are in the roof garden. The Green Roof itself, installed by D.C. Greenworks, is maintained by the City.

In 2013 the library joined the City of Alexandria's Adopt-A-Garden program. Partnering with the city gives additional oversight to the green spaces and resources to the members. One of the requirements for participation was to present a plan. It was decided to create a master plan to be approved by both the Library Board and the City and installed in phases. The Greener Side developed a plan which was approved and Friends committed the money for Phase I to begin. With the expertise and commitment of two local gardeners, Sue Tate and Vineeta Anand, a Butterfly Garden has been planted in the Circle Garden Area. This project, although not in the original plan, was determined to be an excellent use of the land, a way to create a needed resource to pollinators and an interesting place to learn about and visit. This and similar projects are needed to help save Monarch butterflies and other pollinators dying out because of loss of habitat and other factors.

Children's' programs on the Butterfly Garden are being planned to educate them about the joy and beauty in the natural world and our responsibilities to it. This new resource is just a few steps away from the Community School and the Recreation Center.

Other projects are in the works to improve pedestrian access and community comfort. Benches, for example, have been ordered for the Circle Garden replacing the damaged bench that was removed. Other phases of the master landscaping plan will be completely when means are available.

Where does Elaina's tenacity come from? Wordsworth wrote that "the child is father to the man." In her childhood in Beacon, New York, then a down-at-heels little city on the Hudson River, appreciation and care for the land was still important. It seemed everyone had a garden and shared plants and produce. Flowers and vegetables grew in every yard; grape vines and fruit trees were common. Children would gather petals of shrub roses sniff them and rain them on their faces. On a spring time walk to school one could see a hillside of naturalized daffodils. "Where I grew up, every ditch had wildflowers and weeds. My mother took us for spring walks in the woods naming the plants: Jack in the Pulpit, Dog-Tooth Violets, Skunk Cabbage, Dutchmen's Britches,

Blood Root – never to be picked; it was 'protected.' In mountain meadows there were wild blueberries to pick.” “I've heard it said that every garden is a nostalgia garden. I'd like every child to respect the earth and enjoy the beauty as I learned to do.” Elaina says that, “to create a garden is to be on a mission with God.” The Del Rey community is fortunate in having a strong resourceful receptive Friends group willing to support her vision and transform the library grounds.

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