

Garden is a perennial celebration of the life of a beloved educator.

(by Karen F. Mrnarevic - April 28, 2009)

Locals young and old gathered at Sapienza Gardens in Hillsdale for the garden's grand opening on April 25. Members of the Trustee group that organized the cleanup of the woods and planting of thousands of daffodils and dozens of trees were on hand to tell residents about the plans for the memorial garden, which include a children's learning garden and a reading garden. Free doughnuts and coffee were served, and bulbs and memorial bricks were sold in order to raise funds.

Strolling through the Sapienza Gardens in Hillsdale is like stepping into an enchanted forest. One can hear the whisper of the warm breeze rustling the newly budded trees, smell the gently fragrant pine needles and wood chips that cushion each footstep, see the shadow of a red tail hawk circling overhead. The garden is the product of over a year's worth of work, hundreds of helping hands and the love and reverence of a community that sought to honor the life of a lost educator.

When Pascack Valley High School principal Barbara Sapienza passed away unexpectedly on March 5, 2008, the community was left in a state of shock and mourning. But an effort to honor her life and accomplishments was spearheaded soon after by then-Hillsdale Borough Administrator Harold Karns, in cooperation with the Hillsdale Environmental Commission, the Township of River Vale, Hillsdale and River Vale schools, Pascack Valley High School, and several of Sapienza's closest friends. Within months of Sapienza's death, a piece of property that Hillsdale had acquired through open space grants was selected as the site of the memorial garden, a massive cleanup was undertaken to clear the woods of decades worth of refuse, and a landscaping and planting effort was underway. And on Saturday, April 25, an unseasonably warm, dazzlingly bright day, the people who made the garden possible celebrated its grand opening.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the garden is the thousands of daffodils in varying shades of yellow and white that are currently in bloom throughout the 2.7 acre plot of forest, which is located between the rear of Pascack Valley High School and Wood Dale Park. The nearly 15,000 daffodils, along with 24 red bud and dogwood trees, were planted by volunteers from the surrounding communities, scout troops and Sapienza's friends last spring.

At the helm of the garden's creation, overseeing the plantings and donating the daffodil bulbs was Sapienza's longtime friend, Master Gardener Virginia Korteweg, who runs the Beautification Foundation of River Edge, a nonprofit that promotes beautification of public spaces and education for children about gardening and botany. Korteweg selected daffodils as the flower that would make up the initial planting, in part because daffodils, while beautiful and striking to humans, are not an attractive food source to deer, which inhabit the woods in great numbers. Additionally, daffodils are a low-maintenance perennial – a gift that keeps on giving.

As Peter Phillip, a member of the Hillsdale Environmental Commission, said at the grand opening. "Perennials are marvelous. You plant them, you forget about them, and they come back every year."

Korteweg is evidently pleased by the work that has gone into the garden thus far. It has been a lot of work on the part of many people, she said, but the forest provided a perfect site for the garden. "It's easy to put makeup on a beautiful face," she stated. However, Korteweg pointed out emphatically that the garden itself, while beautiful, is not even close to being completed. "A garden is never finished," she said. "This is an ongoing community project, which is what makes it so important as a model to the community." She stated that there are endless possibilities for Hillsdale and River Vale residents to contribute to the future maintenance, expansion and beautification of Sapienza Gardens .

The focus of Korteweg's current creative efforts is to plant a children's garden in a clearing next to the brook on the west side of the property. The garden will be modeled after a learning garden Korteweg designed for River Dell Middle School in Oradell. The garden will feature six raised planting beds, each dedicated to a unique type of garden, such as edible plants and flowering plants, and will be tended to by local school children. Korteweg hopes to be able to go into the schools and work with sixth, seventh and eighth grade students to teach them about gardening, environmentalism and science. "The most important thing is to get the children involved," she said.

The Sapienza Gardens Committee has already begun selling memory bricks to raise money to finance the garden. The bricks will be placed in rows between the planting beds of the learning garden in order to make the garden accessible to children who are wheelchair-bound. The garden will thus be a place where all children, even those with special needs, can learn and enjoy the beauty of the flowers and plants that grow there.

Susan Dunn, a very close friend of Sapienza's who is also a teacher at the high school, said that the children's garden embodies what was most sacred to Sapienza – the children she taught and whose young minds she had a hand in molding over her 40 years in education. "It is a beautiful tribute to her," said Dunn.

Jack Stubbs, who has been the head of the Hillsdale Environmental Commission for 40 years, pointed out that now is great time in history for environmental preservation, since more and more people are interested in "going green." Getting children involved in green initiatives like this garden, he said, just makes sense. "We are hoping the high school will send up their ecology club," said Stubbs. "We're very lucky. It's just marvelous."

Hillsdale Mayor John Sapanara said that he believes the garden will grow and change in the years to come, enduring so that future generations can remember Barbara Sapienza, as well as appreciate the land and learn from it. "We are looking at this as going on for years," he said. "It will stay green forever."

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