

The Secret Life of a Volunteer...

by Walt Shepps

Being a volunteer in the Strybing bookstore/gift shop is mostly routine, occasionally interspersed with adventure. My experience is that I do not just sell gifts and books. I have never been bored among the books during my three-hour shifts as a volunteer in the bookstore. My adventures have been the human interactions that I have experienced. Before I enter the bookstore and put on my volunteer name tag, I am just another person passing by on the street. However, when I step behind the counter in the bookstore, I become a representative of and goodwill ambassador for Strybing Arboretum and Botanical Gardens to visitors from all over the U.S. and the world.

It's as if I said "SHAZAM!" and metamorphosed into a special person of extraordinary gifts. People coming into the bookstore rely upon me to provide information about travel in the city and the Bay Area. I am asked about restaurants, events, art shows, how to get a Strybing docent to lead a special group through the gardens, how one becomes a Strybing volunteer, how to get info about memorial plaques placed on benches in the gardens and making contributions to Strybing. I also get involved in real-life human issues.

Once I had a bevy of beautiful young women descend on me in the store - I guessed they were of college age. One of them asked me where I thought would be the most romantic place in the gardens to sit and talk with a young man whom she was expecting to visit her in San Francisco during the month of December. Being in my seventies now, I was reminded that love can be in bloom any time of the year -- even outside in December.

Sometimes when a visitor and I are alone in the store, I can become a bartender/psychologist. Once a wild-eyed young man, wearing working clothes, but sober and clean cut, unnerved me when he burst into the bookstore. He was very upset and said he needed to talk to someone about a romantic break-up that he had just experienced. He was in agony, sweating profusely, and obviously in great distress. Just then a Navy retiree, who liked to hang out around and in the bookstore just to talk and socialize, walked into the store. I think he saved the day for both the young man and me. The young man repeated the cause of his pain. Without a moment's hesitation, the Navy retiree said, "You are a young man. There are lot of women in the world."

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Flower and Garden Show Volunteer Opportunities

Strybing needs volunteers to staff its booth at the San Francisco Flower and Garden Show, March 19-23.

This year's show is at the Cow Palace and has expanded its hours. Volunteers will work a 3-hour shift. Hours are 9:00am - 8:00pm Wednesday-Saturday, and 9:00am - 6:30pm Sunday. You will answer questions about Strybing and encourage people to join as members.

In return, volunteers will be reimbursed for parking costs and receive free entry to the show.

If you would like more information, or to sign up please call Lisa Frank, Volunteer Services Coordinator at 415-661-1316, ext. 312

Featured Plant: Flowering Currant

Ribes sanguinen var glutinosum (Saxifragaceae)

California Native Garden (Beds 34b-35abc-37)

Text by Kathryn McNeil; Photographs by Joanne Taylor

Flowering Currant begins to bloom in December and lasts until Spring. The delicate pendant tassels of white, rose, even yellow flowers, depending on the species, are enhanced by blooming on bare branches whose leaves wait until March to appear. The twigs of the currant shrubs are hairy, as are the top sides of the leaves. The variety pictured is native from northern California to British Columbia, thriving in moist coastal forests. Rufous hummingbirds and butterflies are attracted to the early spring nectar flowering currant provides.

Ribes species are popular in the British Isles where many horticultural varieties have been created from our western currants, with blooms in deeper shades of rose and longer racemes, flower buds that open sequentially from bottom to top.

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Volunteer cont. from page 1

"You will meet another who will appreciate you."

The young man's demeanor changed, as though experiencing an epiphany, as he considered what he had just been told. His facial features became more calm and relaxed. Then he turned away and walked out of the store, leaving me and my drop-in, unofficial fellow assistant to marvel at what we had just witnessed.

Once a young woman came into the store looking distraught and asked me for travel information. After giving her the directions, she fixedly looked into my eyes and with solemn intensity asked me to make a sign of God's blessing upon her and wish her safety. I am not often asked to assume such spiritual responsibilities.

Just as fascinating was the older man who was alone in the store with me and felt the need to confess (or boast) about how he had smuggled rare plants out of China over a number of years. He went into detail about how he passed through customs without getting caught. He told me that many of the plants were growing in his yard in Contra Costa County. I am still wondering how much of what he told me was true and how much was just passing time.

No more unusual was the time that a young couple, looking very concerned, walked into the bookstore with a bird. It was perched on the man's shoulder. It looked like a parrot to me, and appeared just as comfortable on its perch as a parishioner sitting in church waiting for services to begin. The man said that he and his wife had been walking through the gardens when the bird suddenly flew down to sit on his shoulder and adopted the couple. They asked me if anyone had come looking for his or her pet. No one had. We spoke for a few minutes about their dilemma and then they left.

About thirty minutes later I closed the store and walked to the library entrance to drop off the day's bookstore results. I found Barbara Pitschel and another volunteer talking to a very agitated and anxious young man. The man was going on about his lost pet parrot as I walked up to them. By that time I had removed my volunteer's name tag and reassumed my Clark Kent, plain-vanilla persona. However, I spoke up and told of my encounter with the couple in the book store. Well, the young man regarded me as an intruder who had just walked up from nowhere and was uninvited to share the confidences he was sharing with others. He made a sarcastic remark to me to express his disdain at my uninvited intrusion. Barbara got a shocked look on her face, and I was just about to turn around and walk away from the man as too rude to tolerate. Just then, as if by divine intervention, I saw the couple walking in the garden at a distance, the bird still on the man's shoulder. I pointed to the couple and said, "There's the couple with your pet." Without a word, the man ran off toward the couple and I saw that when he got within a few feet of them the bird flew to his shoulder as if welcoming an old friend. I thought to myself, "I hope he and his bird get along better than he and I did." Another lesson in life - but keep trying.

These are just some of the memories I have since I first became a bookstore volunteer in July 1996. I look forward to and enjoy the days that I am working at Strybing. Each time I serve as a volunteer holds the promise of learning more about people and about myself. Visiting the gardens is its own reward, but every now and again an experience becomes a memory of special adventure.



STRYBING ARBORETUM SOCIETY

Established in 1955

Strybing Arboretum & Botanical
Gardens

Golden Gate Park

Ninth Avenue at Lincoln Way
San Francisco, CA 94122

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Walt has had some interesting bookstore sales as well, once writing up a charge for \$5000 for a treehouse. He recently took in a \$500 membership from a couple buying books at the Strybing Bookstore. No doubt Walt's helpful and friendly demeanor helped close this sale - congratulations Walt!

In Honor of Our Volunteers...

Happy Birthday in March to:

Justin E. Aff, Sarah Bailey, Werner Balk, Celia C. Barbaccia, Bruce Bartholomew, Patricia M. Bitton, Robert D. Boyer, Christina Chan, Ava Chung, Derek Daniels, Gary Gettys, Sasha Houdek, James E. Johnson, J. Jones II, Janet McCloy, Akhil Mehra, Dugan Moore, Hannah Naughton, Derick Pitman, Coral Reiff, Martha Rose, Pamela J. Smith, Phil Soffer, Nataliya Tovchigrechko, Sherrie S. Wayman, Mr. & Ms. Everett Wong, Denny Wu

Happy Birthday in April to:

Gerald Audet, Peter R. Baye, Jean Bishop, Fidette Concepcion, Simone Duffett, Tony Eldridge, Tracy Fidell, Richard Golden, Franklin Gong, Calen Hall, John Hammond, Tiffany Lam, Eduardo Lozano, Helene Maubourguet, Kelly May, Katherine Murphy, Mahmoud Nasser Pourtosi, Lisa E. Seitz, Vanessa Stewart, Whitney Tirrell, Steven Trifone, Manfred Walzer, Kirstin Wehl, Kent Yee

Our apologies if we missed anyone. Please contact the Volunteer Services Coordinator to let us know your birthday or other significant event you would like mentioned in *The Root*. The contact information is on the Bulletin Board.

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED
Strybing Arboretum Society's
36th Annual Plant Sale
Friday, May 2 & Saturday, May 3

Strybing Arboretum's huge annual plant sale is just around the corner! We are looking for **200** volunteers to help us. Our plant sale is the largest sale of rare and unusual plants in Northern California. This is a **fun** and **fast-paced** volunteer opportunity, especially if you like botany, horticulture, or anything to do with plants, gardening and people. Be a part of one of the gardening community's most anticipated events of the season & help raise money for Strybing Arboretum, one of San Francisco's treasures!

Dates of Event: Friday, May 2 5:00pm - 8:00pm

Saturday, May 3 10:00am - 2:00pm

Volunteer Opportunities: Monday, April 28 - Saturday, May 3

All volunteer work occurs between 8:00am and 5:00pm, except on Friday, May 2. Jobs include but are not limited to: Plant Transport, Refreshments, Gate Security, Will-Call. Please call Lisa Frank, Strybing Arboretum's Volunteer Services Coordinator, at (415) 661-1316 x312 for more information, or to sign up.

BULLETIN BOARD

The Volunteer Services Coordinator's
contact info:

415-661-1316, ext.312
volunteer@strybing.org

*We wish to send out a heartfelt
"Thank you very much!" to all the
volunteers who helped with the
Lunar New Year event.*

The SAS Staff

HELP OFFERED – DO YOU NEED
ANOTHER PAIR OF HANDS TO HELP
START OR FINISH A NEW PROJECT IN
YOUR GARDEN? CALL SALLY LUCAS
AT 415 682 7813. NO PAYMENT
REQUIRED – JUST GOOD COMPANY
AND LOTS OF TEA AND COOKIES!

Selected Upcoming Strybing Events
(see Course Catalog for details)

Mar. 2 & 16 - Children's Story Time
Mar. 2 - Monthly Birding Walk
Mar. 3 - Garden Show 2002
Mar. 6 - The Carizzo Plain slide show
Mar. 8 - General Plant Sale
Mar. 8 - Plant Clinic
Mar. 17 - Monthly Monday Walk
Mar. 17 - Cal Hort lecture, "Clematis, Well-Behaved Vines of
Outrageous Beauty"
Mar. 19-23 - San Francisco Flower & Garden Show, Cow Palace
Apr.-June - Up Close & Floral photography exhibit - HCR Library
Apr. 5 - Birding for Families
Apr. 5 - Earth Day, Cal. Academy
Apr. 6 - Monthly Birding Walk
Apr. 6 & 27 - Children's Story Time, followed by Family Walk
Apr. 21 - Monthly Monday Walk with Cal. Hort. speaker
Apr. 21 - Hibiscus & Related Malvaceae, Cal. Hort. lecture
Apr. 24 - Preview party, Up Close & Floral exhibit