
10-27-2014

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Recommended Citation

Patricio, Melissa A., "Hope Blooms at Student-Designed Community Garden" (2014). *Featured News Story*. 439.
https://docs.rwu.edu/weekatroger_featured_news/439

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Hope Blooms at Student-Designed Community Garden

AIAS Freedom By Design architecture students create community garden for reflection, meditation



Director of Parks and Recreation Walter Burke stands in the Garden of Hope with Freedom By Design students Image Credit: Andrea Hansen

October 27, 2014 | Melissa A. Patricio

BRISTOL, R.I. – More than 100 people from the Bristol and Roger Williams University communities came together on Oct. 24 for the official unveiling of the [Gloria Gemma Breast Cancer Resource Foundation](#) Garden of Hope at the new Bristol Community Center. It was a bit of a bittersweet celebration as the garden opened to the public for the first time on what would have been Bristol resident Laurie Cordeiro's 53rd birthday. Cordeiro, who was diagnosed with triple-negative breast cancer in 2009, conceived the garden as a place of reflection and meditation for those affected by the disease that would eventually take her life.

The event, which hosted the Hope Bus and an art exhibit featuring Rhode Island artist Mary Jane Begin's journey through breast cancer, brought both laughter and tears to the crowd, which wandered the garden in awe. It is a hopeful addition to the East Bay, advocates noted, which has one of the highest rates of breast cancer in Rhode Island.

“This is the first municipal Garden of Hope for breast cancer survivors and women who have gone through the process of healing and are in need of community support,” said Bristol Director of Parks and Recreation Walter Burke. The garden, he says, is the community’s way of saying, “We love you, we care about you, we support you.”

Since 2012, Burke has worked with Roger Williams School of Architecture, Art and Historic Preservation students to design and build the garden. More than 80 students participated over two years, with the RWU chapter of the AIAS (American Institute of Architecture Students) Freedom By Design group leading the charge.

“They designed it,” Burke told the crowd, including state senator Walter Felag and state representative Ray Gallison, Bristol Town Administrator Tony Texeira and members of Cordeiro’s family. “It was interesting to see the transition the kids went through. This is life changing. I saw nonchalant kids become passionate. I saw love and commitment.”



The garden, which RWU AIAS President Clayton Daher '16 notes was a collective efforts across the SAAHP design community as well as local partners like DaPonte’s Landscaping Service and American Tree Works, features a ribbon-shaped walkway around a pink dogwood tree dedicated to Cordeiro’s memory. The student designers aimed to create a “hugging” feeling, by planting the shrubbery close to the ribbon path, and building a white cedar retaining wall to create a sense of embrace. The ribbon even has a subtle pink glow – a nod to Cordeiro and her warrior sisters, made with pink pebbles, crushed red glass and seashells to add a touch of sparkle.

“We wanted it to be more than just a space for breast cancer survivors, but for everyone affected by the disease,” Daher said. “Men, women and children all suffer from cancer, and we wanted for them to have a peaceful, tranquil setting to reflect in.”

It was an emotional experience from start-to-finish, said Gabriela Santostefano, Freedom By Design director at RWU: “Everyone has some connection to breast cancer.” For Santostefano, the project hit particularly close to home – her mother battled breast cancer when Santostefano was a child.

“So much of the community has been part of this project, through donations, through love, through support,” Daher said of what he calls the largest Freedom By Design project ever executed in the U.S. “To have something so encompassing for the entire community – that’s amazing.”

Perhaps as amazing as the blooming pink rhododendrons – planted, but not schedule to peak until next spring – just in time for the celebration of life that Cordeiro hoped for.

“People will know after the Hope Garden is put in who Gloria Gemma is, and I’m hoping they’ll do me honor by not letting it die out,” Cordeiro said in a video (below) recorded before her passing. “I’ve only started something, and it’s up to everyone else to make it into what it’s supposed to be – and to make it bigger. And the more people we help, they’ll live longer lives and hopefully there will be a cure for this down the road. But it starts off with people caring about another person.”

Laurie Cordeiro

