



Times Beacon Record Newspapers

Vanderbilt's volunteers help museum put best foot forward

January 3, 2018

One of Suffolk County's museums leads by example in knowing the value of the proverb that many hands make light work.

The Vanderbilt Museum, Mansion & Planetarium has been able to delight visitors with its scenic gardens and extensive programs thanks to the time put in by its roughly 135 year-round volunteers who have donated more than 1,000 hours in 2017.

"Volunteers work hard, their time is very valuable, and it saves the museum a big expense each year," said Lance Reinheimer, executive director.

A visitor's experience is shaped by the work of the museum's volunteers from the minute they enter the estate. Volunteer gardeners designed and planted a garden near the property's entrance at the request of the executive director. Master gardener Gloria Hall has taken over organizing a group formed by her late husband, Bill, that works on the property each Monday, during the growing season from May to October, helping in every aspect from planting and weeding to designing new features.



Members of the Centerport Garden Club volunteer their time to maintain the Vanderbilt Museum's rose garden.

Photo from Vanderbilt Museum

"Gloria has done a great job in carrying on the tradition of caring for our gardens," Reinheimer said. The gardening clubs involved have also helped design and create gardens that encircle the estate's celebration tent on the Great Lawn, which overlooks the Long Island Sound. The director said it has added visually to many of the weddings and special occasions happening on the grounds, anchoring the tent to make it feel like a permanent structure and blend into the property.

Agnes Ward has spearheaded the Centerport Garden Club in donating its members time to delicately handling the Vanderbilt Estate rose garden outside of the planetarium.

"The gardeners really augment my ground staff," the executive director said. "We've made great strides in beautifying the property in the last two years."

Museum guests who take a tour of the historic Gold Coast mansion may be led around by a volunteer, as hundreds have by guide Ellen Mason who has volunteered at the Vanderbilt since May 2006. The retired school teacher said her passion for history keeps her coming back on Saturdays to share the experience with others.

"I've been asked over and over again to get on the payroll," Mason said. "I refuse. I wanted to volunteer, I want to volunteer at something I love doing and it makes my spirit soar. I love the people who work there, it's like a whole other family."

It's so welcoming that there's even a former Vanderbilt employee who continues to come back and volunteer. The museum has several longtime volunteers who regularly give freely of their time including Rick Ellison, Mary McKell, Dale Spencer and Marianne Weeks, according to museum staff.

"There are so many people involved in that Suffolk institution — garden clubs, the living history program, all different types of work," said Herb Mones, husband of museum trustee Gretchen Oldrin-Mones. "It's really under the radar. I don't think the larger community is fully aware of how much the volunteers impact the daily running of that institution that services tens of thousands of school kids each year."

Once inside the mansion, visitors may be treated to live music played on the antique aeolian pipe organ played by volunteers Bill Caputi and Sheldon Cooper.

My feeling is that Long Island is a mecca for volunteerism," Reinheimer said, in recognition how generous the museum's volunteers have been. "Long Islanders give willingly to causes that are worthy."