

The Art of the Docent By Gene Heller

My start as a volunteer at the Bonsai Garden at Lake Merritt (BGLM) was not very auspicious. I had been a regular visitor at the garden for a year or so, just because I liked the place, not because I knew anything about bonsai. When I first thought about doing some volunteer work, what I had in mind was weeding, sweeping, just being a reliable pair of hands for the curators. But when, one day, I found someone at the garden who seemed to be working there and told him I was thinking about helping out, he said he thought I ought to be a docent.

"Me? A docent? I can't be a docent. I know as much about bonsai as you know about... about being a doctor!"

I wasn't prepared for his answer: "Well, I'm a doctor."

Me: "Oh. I didn't know that. Anyway, there's other stuff I can do around here. But a docent has to answer questions from visitors. I don't know enough about bonsai to answer questions."

The Doctor: "What's the oldest tree here?"

Me: "That's not fair. Everyone knows it's that California juniper over there."

The Doctor: "That's the most common question visitors ask docents. And you just answered it. So, you should be a docent."

I looked at him. He asked me, "What's your favorite tree here?"

Me: "Huh? I guess it's one of the redwoods. But sometimes it's that big Atlas cedar. It depends on..."

He interrupted me. "That's the other most common kind of question."

Then he waited a few seconds, until I realized the game was up.

From the beginning, I got lots of guidance and support. Other docents showed me how to handle the routine tasks: opening the gate and disarming the alarm; checking to make sure the sprinkler watering system has been sprinkling; ringing up sales of items from the gift shop; and recording the number of visitors, their donations, and their purchases.

Answering questions from visitors turned out to be, after just a few weeks, not too difficult. There are about half a dozen questions that are asked repeatedly. I've already mentioned the top two: oldest tree, favorite tree. Next most common is, "Which is the Lincoln tree?" Most *Golden Statements* readers will know the answer to that one: it's our Daimyo oak, given by the Japanese government to Anson Burlingame in 1863. The other popular questions are more mundane: What's the origin of the garden? Where does our funding come from? What's our relationship with the City of Oakland? And of course, where are the nearest restrooms?

Then there are the less common questions that are, for me, more interesting. As you know, "Can I grow a bonsai at home?" doesn't have a single fixed answer. But it's the sort of question that can initiate an interesting conversation with a visitor, if we discuss what the visitor's goals are, what growing conditions they've got at home, and how much time they want to spend.

And every docent learns that there are the unique, one-off questions you just can't anticipate, such as "Should I get this t-shirt in large or extra-large?"

It turns out that being a docent doesn't mean I can't also be that "reliable pair of hands" I wanted to be. In addition to answering questions from visitors, there are occasional tasks I can do as time and the size of the crowd allow. On a slow day I can do as much weeding and sweeping as I want. If a tree needs to be moved, or a sprinkler head needs to be tweaked, the curators have learned that my hands are pretty reliable.

The activity that for me stands out as the part of the job that's most rewarding is interacting with visitors. This really takes off when we move beyond a visitor's questions and my answers, to a genuine, if brief, conversation. I'd never directly ask a visitor, "What does the garden mean to you?" But often, I don't have to. This little chat happened recently:

Visitor: "You know, I've been coming here for ten years. It's my secret getaway."

Me: "I know, it's so tranquil."

Visitor: "Yeah, it's really my antidepressant."

Me (not out loud, just to myself): "Yeah, way more effective than Prozac. And way cheaper."

Some of the other things I've learned as a docent:

- If you give a little child a stick-on star, you've made friends with their parents.
- The world doesn't come to an end if someone strays off the paved path to look at a tree up close.
- If a dog on a leash starts barking, it's startling, and might require a docent intervention, but if the dog is barking at squirrels, it saves me the trouble of barking at the squirrels.
- When I started, I worried about my ignorance of bonsai techniques, history, and aesthetics. But, happily, I can add those items to the list of things I'm learning.

Of course, there are some questions I'll never be able to answer, such as, Do babies in a stroller count as one visitor, one-half visitor, or not at all? Do bonsai trees in the garden really talk to each other between the hours of 2 a.m. and 4 a.m., as one visitor insisted, they do?

Some of the best things I've learned at the garden were only indirectly associated with being a docent. Top among them is the 20 minutes I spent watching our Curator, Kathy Shaner, pruning a redwood. This particular redwood is the first tree donated to the BGLM and was my first "favorite" tree. When I met it, it looked very much like a tiny Christmas tree. I stood close while Kathy was pruning and listened to her describe what the tree will look like in two years, in five years. I shouldn't admit this, but at first, I

thought she was ruining the tree. But I had enough sense to keep this opinion to myself, and to think about Kathy's vision for the tree. What I began to see, after Kathy had been pruning for maybe 10 minutes, was that the miniature Christmas tree I liked so much didn't reflect a full size redwood out in the woods. And when Kathy had finished, I discovered a new kind of beauty in that tree that Kathy had revealed, and that would last for a long, long time.

One final note: When I started, I had some concerns about how I, as a docent, would deal with an unpleasant visitor. So far, I've only had one like that, a teenage boy who was slightly drunk and wanted to know if our 1,600 year old California juniper was older than he was. I told the boy that I'd get back to him when he was in a pot. His friends laughed and took him away, and I went back to sweeping.



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