Volunteer Units *and the* Arboretum Legacy

By Megan Meyer

In the year that I have been working at the Foundation, I have interacted with many people—including members—who do not know what our volunteer units are. That would not have been the case 20 years ago, and that should not be the case today. This article is a first step towards educating members about the history of our units, and starting to think about how we as an organization can support the health and vitality of a program that has been invaluable to our mission.

Indeed, the history of the units represents a significant portion of the history of the Arboretum Foundation itself. Juanita Graham was the wife of Donald Graham, one of the original founders of the Foundation, and she created Unit 1 in the late 1930s. She modeled the units on the guilds of the Children's Orthopedic Hospital in order to create a role for women to become actively involved with the Arboretum. The units' primary function was to develop public interest and support. For many decades, the units also provided the main organizational structure and supervision for the volunteers at Washington Park Arboretum.

Did you know that units have made many important contributions to the Arboretum over the years? Here are just a few notable ones

- The Unit Council (a coordinating body comprised of officers from each of the units) planned and produced the first Arboretum Foundation plant sale in 1947. What initially began as a sale under a tent in Rhododendron Glen now lives on as our FlorAbundance spring plant sale at Magnuson Park.
- In 1958, the Unit Council sought permission from the Foundation and the University in order to build a greenhouse in response to a demand for more classes in plant propagation. The Pat Calvert Greenhouse was completed in 1959 and has been volunteer-run ever since.
- In 1961, when the demand for tours of the Arboretum exceeded the director's capacity,

ABOVE: Unit 69 touring the garden of Unit 5 member Susan Ayrault in the summer of 2014.

the Unit Council responded by launching the Arboretum Guide Program. One year later, when the Seattle Japanese Garden was opened, the Guide Program expanded to include Japanese Garden guides. Today, the University of Washington Botanic Gardens handles the public tour program for most of the Arboretum, but Unit 86 continues to provide the volunteer force for the Japanese Garden guides.

TOP: Arboretum Foundation Work and Fun Day, May 1967. Members of all the volunteer units used to come to work in the Arboretum once a year wearing funny hats. (Photo by Joy Spurr)

BOTTOM: Unit 71, the Mercer Island Unit, hosts a rummage sale to raise funds for the Arboretum in 1985. (Photo by Helen Moody)

Current Unit Activities

Now that the Foundation has paid staff, the responsibility of determining volunteer tasks and needs has been taken off the units' plate. However, unit members continue to respond to our call for volunteers in all arenas: Unit members are Garden Stewards, volunteers at plant sales, help build the display garden, are regular gift shop volunteers, and more. Some units schedule a day to come in and do a service project as a whole, but—more often than not—individual members sign up for opportunities of interest to them and take these on in addition to their unit involvement.

We currently have 22 units, and each one is unique. The best way I have found to describe the units is to call them "garden clubs with a mission." Units have strong social and educational components to them, to be sure, but they also exist in order to support the Washington Park Arboretum.

Each unit has a fundraising component: Every unit member is required to become a member of the Foundation, and many units go above and beyond that by either holding fundraising events on our behalf or adding a donation to their unit dues. For example, in summer 2014, Unit 98 (based in Tacoma and Gig Harbor) raised $2300 for the Arboretum, through the purchase and re-sale of hundreds of remaindered gardening books. Last year, the same unit raised more than $1800 for the Arboretum, through a community-wide garage sale.

Units bring together individuals who share a common bond in their love of nature and horticulture. A common trait of all unit members is a thirst for knowledge. Whether they elect a singular program chair or collectively decide their programs for the year, the programmatic elements are a key component of the unit experience. Most units do a combination of garden tours and guest

lecturer events, and they use their unit dues to cover the expenses for these activities.

The frequency and format of unit meetings varies greatly. Some units meet monthly and some meet quarterly. Some units rotate between members' homes and have luncheon meetings, others use community spaces, and others still forego formal meetings and convene wherever their programs are to be held. We offer and encourage each unit to hold at least one meeting a year at the Arboretum, where we treat them to a tour or lecture and coordinate the use of Wisteria Hall in the Graham Visitors Center.

Unique Histories

Each unit has its own history that can be traced back to an influential Arboretum supporter or group of supporters. For example, Unit 16's first meeting took place on a beautiful spring day in 1965 at Myrtle DeFriel's cottage on Lake Washington. Myrtle was the Eastside Unit Council representative at the time and invited about 20 friends to meet in her garden and form a new unit. The unit's dedication to the Arboretum was genuine. Members actively worked at plant and bulb sales and were rewarded with the Thorgrimson Service Trophy (named for O.B. Thorgrimson, and influential figure in the early days of the Arboretum).Unit 16 is credited with sponsoring the early Arboretum Art Auction, and many of its members have had an active role in the leadership of the Arboretum sales, Pat Calvert Greenhouse, Governing Board, and other Foundation areas. Their Christmas Auction is a successful fundraising event that has allowed them to contribute gifts to the Foundation to fund the purchase of office computers, the *Lagerstroemia* Collection, Pat Calvert Greenhouse remodeling, the Gateway to Chile capital campaign, and more.

Unit 26 from Bainbridge Island started one afternoon in the early 1950s. Lillian McEwan invited a group of her island neighbors and friends to tea. She shared with them her hope that an Arboretum unit might be formed on Bainbridge Island. Her initial focus was twofold: that the wild blue huckleberry—indigenous to the island—might be saved, and that those in the group might grow in their knowledge of horticulture. Now in its sixth decade, Unit 26 includes members from nearby off-island communities as well as Bainbridge. Several of those who attended the unit's inaugural meeting still belong, as do some second-generation members.

Units have male members, too! Jack Robins recently sent us a brief history of Unit 52, the "Couples Unit." It is a lovely account that provides keen insight into how a unit works, and the value it provides to both the Arboretum and the unit members. Unit 52 was formed in 1970 by Jack and Charlotte Robins and Eilif and Tina Kuhnle, who served as first president and first program chairs, respectively. Unit 52 members John Behnke, Dave Hervey and Fred Isaac all served with distinction as president of the Arboretum Foundation Board of Directors—while Jack Robins, Meg Harry and Tina Kuhnle have all served on our Board.

Over the years, Unit 52 has been deeply involved with volunteering at the Foundation's spring plant sale—working in every area from food preparation in the canteen to table set-up to marking and cashiering. Coupled with the hard work has been a strong social and educational element:

"A tradition of Unit 52," writes Jack, "is to gather on the Saturday evening of the plant sale at George and Peggy Corley's to drink a little wine, enjoy a delicious member-produced dinner, top it off with a slice of special member-made

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fruit pie, and then move to the living room for a short Unit meeting, mostly to elect officers of the coming year and to solicit any new program suggestions for the new Program Chair's consideration. When new officers were announced, George Corley could be counted on to produce his 'Railroad Music'—appropriate to his take on being 'railroaded' in the election process."

As an example of the horticultural- and nature-based activities that the unit participates in each year, Jack sent us the annual meeting program from 1976–77:

September 26, 1976: Hike to Lake 22—Bring lunch, warm, waterproof clothing & boots

November 30, 1976: Meeting at Woodruffs—Mushrooms: principal local edible and inedible varieties

January 31, 1977: Meeting at Woosleys—Pruning: how to prune right and why it matters

March 29, 1977: Meeting at Gildows—House plants: exotic but easy to raise

May 4–5, 1977: Plant Sale at Arboretum—Dinner and meeting at Corleys

"Memories of our Lake 22 hike live on," writes Jack. "Most of us recall Marian Woosley's complaining (only partly in jest) about how steep the trail was (not very), how rough the trail was (not particularly), how long the trail was (only 2.2 miles), and what a tough trail it was (she was happy to recover from her exertions by drinking her share of the wine brought in Jack Robins' backpack to celebrate the Robins' 25th wedding anniversary)."

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Looking Ahead

As Jack illustrates, the key motivators for unit members' involvement are friendship, pursuit of horticultural knowledge, and support of the Arboretum. ("The Park is better off for our efforts," says Jack, "as are we too!") That has remained true from Unit 1's inception in the late 1930s to today. The result of that involvement has been crucial support to the Arboretum Foundation through the units' fundraising efforts, volunteer support and advocacy.

It is true that the number of our units has declined over the years, but that is not surprising given that the traditional unit model was best suited for housewives and retirees with flexible schedules. When we talk about recruitment at our All-Units meetings, the general consensus is that people today lead busier, more complicated lives, and there is more competition for their involvement. Simply put, since people are more reluctant to "join" things that require an ongoing commitment of their time, we may never rebuild our units to the size and strength they once were.

However, there is opportunity for growth. As mentioned, many of our new members and current volunteers do not know what units are, so one of our jobs at the Foundation is to educate and promote units. Accordingly, we will be updating the new member information packet to include information about joining or starting a unit. Our resources for forming new units can emphasize options that are more compatible with today's work schedules. Also, we can build a better system to connect prospective unit members with existing units that have openings—many of our current units are eager to welcome new members! If you would like to join or start a unit, please contact Megan Meyer at 206-577-0549 or mmeyer@arboretumfoundation.org.

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