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USC's arboretum 'absolutely stunning'

Hard work transforms overgrown tract into jewel

By JOHN MONK

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Tucked away in a quiet inner city neighborhood is one of Columbia's most special places.

"It's just absolutely stunning," said Christy Frederick of Columbia, a recent first-time visitor to the University of South Carolina's Belser Arboretum.

Located east of Shandon in the Sherwood Forest neighborhood, the seven-acre tract is surrounded on almost all sides by houses.

"It's like entering a cathedral," said Jim Morris, incoming vice president of Columbia Green, a group that promotes beautification in the city. It recently gave the tract an award of special merit for "providing an invaluable gift to both USC and Columbia."

In 1959, the late W. Gordon Belser, a lawyer and naturalist, deeded the land to the university.

The university agreed to keep the land - it has never known a sidewalk, street or parking lot - as a sanctuary for plants and wildlife.

But only recently has it become the kind of inviting place it is now. For years, the tract was a sprawling tangle of fallen logs and invasive weeds like kudzu.

Now, visitors gush when they enter.

Officially, it's a USC earth sciences teaching lab, but people say it stirs the soul as well.

"When you are in it, you have this sense of being away from the city," said USC landscape architect Ben Coonrod. "It's an amazing little piece of nature."

"It's a real jewel, one of the best-kept secrets in the city," said Bud Tibshrary, a neighbor.

The force behind the transformation of the Belser tract, everyone says, is USC retired professor Pat DeCoursey, a scientist who specializes in circadian rhythms of rodents.

"I hate the word 'retired'," said DeCoursey with a smile. She estimates she has spent 3,500 hours, at least, working on the Belser tract.

With the help of hundreds of volunteers, she has created an enormous outdoor classroom with 10 different biomes, or distinct mini-habitats of plants and trees.

"It is incredibly diverse here. We can show students a cypress swamp, oak forests, chestnut forests, pine plantations," she said.

Like an artist using colors on a canvas, DeCoursey used the tract's natural features - hills, high winding sand dunes, a swamp, a bog, a long valley, a creek - as settings for her 10 biomes. One high sand dune, for example, features a stand of young loblolly and long-leaf pines. The low-lying swamp features a 125-foot bald cypress like you'd find in Congaree National Park.

Ordinarily, you couldn't find so much diversity in such a small place.

But, DeCoursey explains, the Belser tract's numerous topographical features allow for such variety. Each habitat, for example, has a different kind of soil, with different sun exposures, and different elevations.

"And each soil has a different moisture availability," she said. "In sandy soil, the water can run right through, and it's dry in an hour. In the swamp, the water might stay up to four days."

A long looping trail makes the whole place accessible. Covered in wooden chips, the path goes uphill and downhill. It crosses a small wooden bridge, as well as a stream with four waterfalls.

In the valley, there's a Zen garden with rock piles suggestive of a miniature Stonehenge. Nearby, on a hillside, there's an

outdoor classroom where students sit on stumps that face a roofed shelter. Volunteers have put up dozens and dozens of unobtrusive tags and plaques explaining it all.

Three years ago, Biological Sciences officials asked if any faculty members would spend time trying to save the Belser arboretum. It was by all accounts then an overgrown, useless patch of land.

DeCoursey volunteered. In the past, she had created a half-dozen gardens around the campus, using student labor.

But she had never done anything the size of the Belser tract.

"This is my biggest garden," she said.

When she first showed up in the neighborhood, some neighbors wondered if she was up to the task. After all, she's 5-foot 3, weighs 110 pounds and will only concede her age is "somewhere north of 65."

But neighbors soon learned she wields a mean chain saw and is a tireless worker. They spotted her at the tract - clipping and cutting and lugging buckets of water - from dawn to after dark.

"Early on, she would bring her chain saw, and I would say, 'Pat, let me do that.' And she would start it up and start cutting trees down," said Larry Hembree, a former president of the Sherwood Forest Neighborhood Association whose house backs up onto the tract.

"The work this woman has put in is unimaginable," Hembree said.

Given her past, it wasn't surprising. After all, as a scientist she had studied and explored in Antarctica as well as in 2-mile-high mountain ranges in Oregon. These days, at the Belser tract, working in the cold stream handling stones, she sometimes wears the same warm, insulated mukluk boots she wore at the South Pole.

DeCoursey had another talent, neighbors learned: She could get others interested in volunteering time to work at the tract. In the past two years, she assembled teams of volunteers - from Boy Scouts to USC students to neighbors. She's gotten small amounts of money from the city and from the university to help finance little projects.

"She's a one-person dynamo who really knows her stuff," said Ed Tilden, president of Sherwood Forest Neighborhood Association, who, with his wife, has lived next to the tract for years. "A little general ."

As DeCoursey and her bands of volunteers have made the arboretum increasingly inviting, thousands of people have come to visit: students - on field trips and to work - garden clubs, church groups. Not everyone has a scientific interest. It was a liberal arts class that built the Zen garden.

Coonrod marvels at how DeCoursey has transformed an eyesore into a thing of beauty and usefulness.

"If I followed her around, I'd be beat. The whole thing has really come from her love of the place, her desire to protect something special," Coonrod said.

Unlike city parks, the arboretum is not generally open to the public. But on the third Sunday of every month, it opens its doors to the public for three hours.

Biology professor and former Biological Sciences chairwoman Sarah Woodin worries when DeCoursey moves on, the arboretum will revert to a jungle.

Money is needed to increase a now-tiny endowment that is woefully inadequate to bring in the \$30,000 or \$40,000 a year needed to pay a qualified part-time person to do what DeCoursey is doing, Woodin said.

DeCoursey is unique, Woodin said. "She has an understanding of what you can and can't do to a forest. A person who takes care of an arboretum has to have a depth of understanding about a forest that is rare."

The specialness of it is due to her, Woodin said.

"What you feel when you go into the arboretum is the harmony that Pat creates."

Since 2007, DeCoursey said last week, much of the major heavy lifting to create an arboretum out of a neglected woodland is over. But there are still trees to be planted, invasive weeds to fight, congested areas to clear - upkeep, upkeep, upkeep.

"The work is never done," she said.

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