

MEET

People Sharing Their Passions



“You walk into that room, and there’s just this feeling of peace and loveliness. What’s not to like about all those flowers and plants?”

Eleanor Childs, a former teacher and gardener, took a special tour of the Flower Show that brought her up close to the exhibits.

Sensory Exploration

A VISION-IMPAIRED PLANT LOVER FINDS NEW WAYS TO ENJOY THE GARDEN.

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by CATHERINE STRAWN

The first thing Eleanor Childs noticed when she walked into the 2018 PHS Philadelphia Flower Show was the feeling of the cool, humid air on her skin. “And then you can smell the plants, and that’s a beautiful thing,” she says. “It’s really multisensory.”

The 72-year-old former teacher began losing her eyesight more than a decade ago due to glaucoma and diabetic retinopathy. Ever since, she’s called on her other senses to experience the world. Once a frequent traveler, she had enjoyed cross-country train rides and camping trips, and as her vision deteriorated, she became frustrated by her lack of independence. In 2014, she enrolled in classes at Philadelphia’s Associated Services for the Blind and Visually

Impaired (ASB). There she learned to navigate the city by listening to traffic, using her cane, and visualizing where she wanted to go. “It was like someone flipped on the light switch,” she says.

Through ASB’s connection with Art-Reach, a nonprofit organization with a mission of making cultural events accessible to everyone, Childs also rediscovered the PHS Philadelphia Flower Show. She first went to the show shortly after moving to Philadelphia in 1980 and still remembers the experience. “You walk into that room, and there’s just this feeling of peace and loveliness,” she says. “What’s not to like about all those flowers and plants?”

Now she tours the show with Art-Reach guides who provide rich verbal

descriptions and offer opportunities to smell and touch the plants. Exhibit designers also share details about their inspirations. "Since the Flower Show affected me so strongly when I did see, some of that feeling is still with me as I'm there experiencing it without my vision," Childs says.

Growing up in the heart of Los Angeles, Childs didn't have much of a yard, but her mother made the most of every inch of dirt and instilled in her daughter a love of plants. Childs smiles as she relates the story of the time she and a friend surreptitiously pulled leaves from a neighbor's herb bed simply because they smelled so good. "If we weren't playing marbles, we were probably in somebody's garden," she says.

In 1980, she moved to Philadelphia, where she worked as a teacher and then director at Montessori Genesis II School in the Mantua neighborhood for more than 30 years. There she brought science lessons to life through a vegetable garden installed with support from the PHS Green City Teachers program. More than two decades after that garden was first planted, she still recalls all the details: the four types of tomatoes, two types of eggplant, watermelon, strawberries, pumpkins, zucchini, onions, and all the herbs they grew. "A big part of Montessori is using the different senses to learn," she says.

Even with limited vision, Childs still finds ways to enjoy plants at her home in a University City senior living community. Her right eye can only sense light, but her left eye's remaining vision allows her to see better on gray days and at dusk. It also allows her to see high-contrast colors. "I was just thinking recently," she muses, "maybe I'll buy an amaryllis, because I know I'm going to see that rich red!"

PHS received the Kimmel Award for Accessible Experience from Art-Reach this year for providing Flower Show tickets for an adaptive ASL interpreted and verbally described tour for guests who are deaf, blind, or low-vision. For information on Art-Reach programs, go to art-reach.org.



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