

A TEACHER STILL LEARNING

By Donna Ahrens

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Gloria Miller



Trillium

what we know cannot keep us alive

nor do we survive one moment to rest in the next

forgive me

when these words came to me

i wanted to walk far back into the woods

lie down by the muskrat's pond

and let trillium grow through my back.

—Lon Miller, Friend of the Garden

When Gloria Miller was a child, growing up on the family farm on the North Dakota prairie, in spring and summer she would run to meet her father as he drove his tractor up to the house for lunch. In the tractor toolbox, Gloria would find freshly picked flowers—vivid orange wood lilies, wild roses, bluebells, whatever was in bloom. “It was the highlight of my day,” she recalls.

Six decades later, Gloria’s step has slowed a bit, but she still eagerly awaits the emergence of blooms in the Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden every year. “Spring is my favorite season,” she says, ticking off the flowers she especially treasures: trillium, Virginia bluebells, showy lady’s slipper, columbine.

Gloria and her husband Lon began visiting the Garden in the early 1970s, and within a few years, Garden Curator Ken Avery encouraged her to volunteer in the shelter. In 1983, she became the 16th member of the Friends of the Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden. Since then, she has contributed to the Friends in ways too numerous to count.

An artist and teacher (of art and business) by training, Gloria describes herself as a lover of nature “by osmosis,” recalling fond memories of her mother’s extensive vegetable and flower garden. Over the years, she has united her artistic talents with her love of art in several projects for the Friends. Gloria designed the Friends’ fringed gentian logo, featured in the organization’s correspondence and newsletter, and designed and illustrated a Friends membership brochure used for many years.

Her creativity was perhaps most evident in the booklet *From the Friends to Friends*, a gift for Friends donors and other contributors. Gloria conceived the idea for the publication in the mid-1980s, as a way to highlight the beauty of the Garden in words and pictures. An avid photographer, she chose photos she had taken in the Garden, and then added poems collected over the years—including several written by

Lon—to complement the photos. With the project in its final stages, Gloria showed it to the Friends board.

“There was just one problem,” she recalls. “The Friends didn’t have much money, so there was quite a bit of discussion about whether we could afford to print the book.” At that point, Friends board member Shirley Schultz stepped in: She offered to pay \$500 to cover the cost of a printing. The booklet was a great success and went through a second printing a few years later.

In addition to her art-related projects, Gloria served two terms as president of the Friends board, as well as its art historian, and remains active on the board. She mentions the “many interesting, warm and friendly people who are very concerned with the welfare of the Garden, and working together to help preserve it.” She and Lon, who died in 2004, helped plan many Friends events and contributed poetry and photos to *The Fringed Gentian*. Former Friends President Steve Pundt comments, “Thank goodness for Gloria, who has been a creative, loyal, ready-to-help-out-at-whatever-is-needed volunteer.”

Gloria also volunteers at the shelter, which she calls her “weekly ‘gift’ of mental relaxation and renewal.” She enjoys bird watching from inside the shelter while a fire burns in the fireplace and says she often seeks out a spot “up on the hill in the prairie, under the big oak tree. I love to sit there and read poetry or just watch birds.”

Beyond her affiliation with the Friends, Gloria has been a longtime member of the Richfield Garden Club and has participated in the Minneapolis Art Institute’s “Art in Bloom” event for the past four years. The annual event displays floral interpretations of selected art from the MIA’s permanent collection. This year, Gloria’s entry was an interpretation of Jennifer Steinkamp’s “Hurdy Gurdy Man (Chrysanthemums),” which also was featured on the 2013 Art in Bloom poster and brochure. The Steinkamp work consists of small, high-definition video projections of computer-animated flowers dancing to the Donovan song for which the piece is named.

It’s not so surprising that Gloria chose a contemporary, rather challenging work of art for her project. Like all the best teachers, Gloria is also a curious and engaged learner. Her comments about her involvement with the Friends underscore that impression: “I’ve been volunteering for many years, and every time I come to the garden, I learn something new about birds and flowers, or nature in general,” she says.

She adds, “Most of all, the Garden is just good for the soul! There is no other place like it. ... I call it heaven on earth.” ♦