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Margie Boulé

Boule: Her 40-page list of contacts keeps growing, as does the good will

09/10/02

When you grow roses, you understand each flower is its own surprise, its bud transformed from a fat baby's fist to an explosion of silky petals, its soul in the center.



MARGIE BOULÉ

Sue Casey says she was "given" an idea last September, two weeks after the terrorist attacks on America. Approaching her car after an evening service at Central Lutheran Church, Sue asked God what she could do to help. "It was a desperate feeling. I'm not a mental health professional. I couldn't go to New York and dig in the rubble."

As she was about to put her key in the lock, "for some reason I looked up, and here was this beautiful yellow rose" growing at the curb. . . . "And I thought: That's it. We're the City of Roses. I'll give New York a rose garden." By the time she reached home she had a name: the Remember Me Rose Garden.

How many millions of people got a quiet inspiration after last year's attacks and let it slip away? Sue Casey tackled her idea, held it close, nursed it, nurtured it.

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Today, nearly a year later, Sue, a receptionist, librarian and all-around organizer at the Ball Janik law firm in downtown Portland, has expanded on her dream. Now she's deep in preparations for planting three giant, healing rose gardens, in New York, Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania, each at or near the sites of attacks, each with more than 3,000 rose bushes — one for each person killed Sept. 11.

Almost daily she calls or e-mails the governors' offices, senators' offices, mayors' offices, memorial design commissions, the head of the U.S. Forest Service, the director of the U.S. Botanic Garden. She has stood in the office of the Rockefeller Family Fund in New York City, admiring the Monets and Picassos on the walls, and talked about America's need for a safe place, a rose garden where people could grieve and find peace.

She has testified at meetings in Manhattan, met with memorial committees to discuss garden sites; persuaded the All-American Rose Selection, an association of rose growers, to donate 9,159 roses; received federal approval for a nonprofit organization with tax-exempt status in near-record time; and written her first budget — for more than \$7 million.

She's had the support of Ball Janik, but Sue and her husband have paid for it all, using their cell phone for calls, spending the family's tax return and taking money out of their 401(k) to cover travel expenses.

Even Sue sounds surprised at all she's accomplished this year. "Anyone at the firm would tell you I'm normally very quiet and very reserved. People here are shocked I'm doing this." But she is doing it. There is no doubt, she says, the gardens will be built.

Don't believe it? Ask Lt. Bob Jackson of the New York Fire Department, Engine 54, Ladder 4, Battalion 9. His station lost more than any other on Sept. 11: 15 men. A rose lover, Bob has joined the Remember Me Rose Garden board. "Sue's a hardworking lady, and she's hustling," Bob says. "She's got commitment." On Feb. 6, the NYC parks department officially accepted the rose garden from the city of Portland. "We'll have a rose garden, all right," Bob says. After Sept. 11 Bob was assigned to support the families of the men who died. "Any time I mention it to our families, I have total support," Bob says. "They love the idea."

The reason, Sue says, is "so many did not get their loved ones back, and they need a place to go to connect and be with them. We don't want to be the memorial. We want the gardens to embrace or surround the memorials."

Sue adds to her 40-page typed list of contacts every day, works the phones and shoots off e-mails. "I can't explain how this has happened, but I've been guided to the right people, or they have been guided to me." Like the time she met a woman on a Portland bus whose daughter, a former Rose Festival queen, now works in a New York office with a man who was instrumental in the original design of the towers.

Everybody wants to help. The Pennsylvania farmer who watched United Flight 93 crash into the field next to his is enthusiastic; he's giving Sue tips on how to protect roses in harsh winters.

Next week Sue will again travel east. Her schedule is full; she will meet

with the Lower Manhattan Development Corp.; a firm that will license the gardens for donations from all states; the president of the American League of Theaters and Producers, and the advertising agency Ogilvy & Mather. And Washington, D.C., will officially accept its garden.

The gardens will be a gift from Portland, but they will cost us nothing. Expenses will be covered by donations from individuals, foundations and corporations. "If I were going to a bank, they would have a tough time with me," Sue says, "because what I have for collateral you can't hold or see. It's in my heart."

She figures it will take two to six years to bring the gardens to first bloom. She'll be patient. "Ever since this idea came to me as a gift," she says, "I've had an incredible feeling of immense joy, all the time."

As she talks, her gaze drifts out an office window to the blue of the Willamette River and the green trees on Mount Tabor. "I love the bagels and cheesecake and the sugar-coated nuts you get at the corner stands in New York," she says. "But here you can see the sky. You can smell when the rain's going to come."

Sue remembers looking out her hotel room on her first trip to New York and seeing nothing but concrete. A lifelong Portlander, surrounded by growing things, Sue understands gardens are exercises in optimism, triumphs of hope, places of creation. She wants to share our wealth. Remember Me Rose Garden project: www.remember-me-rose.com

Margie Boule: 503-221-8450; marboule@aol.com

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