Outgoing President' Arlene Field's Report for the Annual Meeting

April 14, 2021

To quote Jerry Garcia, "What a long strange trip it's been."

The adage that time waits for no one is so true. It keeps marching on. This was a fact during my term as President. It seems like yesterday that I assumed the role of President on a lovely sunny spring day in 2019 at the Aqua Turf Club. Yes, the very same place where we used to get together in person to enjoy a program and a meal, and laugh and hug. In many ways, it also feels like a long time ago.

What happened during these past two years? For starters, the elephant in the room – COVID-19. The Federation lived history while also making history. Let's take a step back in time and review what we've all been able to accomplish.

My term started on a high note. I attended the National Garden Clubs Convention in Biloxi, Mississippi back in May of 2019. We were off and running.

One of my personal goals was to bring The Federation closer to our individual clubs across the State. Visiting clubs provided me with the opportunity to listen and learn about the wonderful accomplishments of each club, and also their challenges. I forged new relationships and friendships while promoting the benefits of what The Federation brings to clubs, along with adding many thousands of miles to my car's odometer.

Things were humming along that first year. Schools were taking place, with high attendance. Councils were meeting. Club President's Day in September of 2019 became an annual event. We enjoyed the annual Awards Meeting which is always circled on everyone's calendar as a not-to-be-missed event. Significant momentum was being built.

The annual statewide Flower Show at the Convention Center in February of 2020 was a rousing success – deemed one of the best ever by all who attended and exhibited. The exhibits were outstanding and participation was up from all clubs. We were on a real high. 2020 promised to be a great year.

We all know what happened next. In March, those high-highs rapidly cascaded to the lowest of lows. Everything shut down. Some clubs made an early decision to totally shutter their club year, cancel plant sales and put off garden tours. The year became one giant unknown.

Just as more and more people turned to their gardens for serenity from the constant drumbeat of pandemic news, The Federation began a year-long effort to help clubs move forward. With the help of Shirley Hall and Karen Pyskaty, we conducted in-depth research with over 30 Club Presidents to better understand what they were going through. What we learned was factored into how to better help clubs manage and continue to grow and thrive during the pandemic.

While it would have been easy to shut down entirely, as gardeners, the word "quit" is not even in our dictionaries. The Board was resolute in wanting to move forward. We shifted to moving everything to a virtual format. We offered very many training sessions for clubs and quickly migrated to being proficient in all things Zoom.

Based upon what we learned, we pivoted and organized a virtual statewide Club Presidents Day meeting, and realized the greatest attendance in our history. That was followed by a virtual Awards Meeting. We were able to bask in the success of clubs and their members, all while being apart in our homes. Because of the tireless efforts of many, we made the impossible happen. We stayed together and grew stronger, even throughout a pandemic. That may be the most significant accomplishment of the past year. We're still here, and ready to come back even stronger.

We've also offered well-received virtual forums covering topics such as fundraising during the time of a pandemic and the awards process, with more forums to come.

This year has been a learning experience, but one that proved to be beneficial. The ability to convert to an online platform was a godsend for all of us. Most everyone jumped in and figured out how to use the technology to our advantage. This led to the decision to shift Environmental School to fully online last September. After recognizing the success of Environmental School, Landscape Design School was held virtually last month and included over 70 registrants from 13 states.

This year, with donations received from our members, The Federation made contributions to the National Garden Clubs USA Disaster Fund, to the Penny Pines Reforestation project in the U.S. and to the international Global Partners: Running Waters organization to provide safe drinking water in Latin America.

One other encouraging note, we have two trips planned for 2021 which are already filled to capacity. The first is in early summer to the Brandywine Valley in Pennsylvania and another in the fall to five southwest National Parks. So we're still here, and ready to come back even stronger.

On a personal note, I hope that you will honor my presidency by taking my theme to heart − "Out with Invasives, In with Natives." Continue to tackle this very serious environmental problem. It begins with one person in one yard with one garden. I know that very many clubs and individuals have addressed this pervasive problem that is choking out native plants in our communities. If we all do our part, we can make a difference so that future generations may continue to enjoy our beautiful State.

It's been both a privilege and an honor to serve as your President. These two years reinforced my belief that gardeners truly are the best people. Thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

Sincerely,
Arlene