



LAURA BERMAN

Women's group works to restore Belle Isle's glitter

I solemnly swear: I saw this with my own eyes, on Belle Isle, on June 7.

The Scott Fountain, all gleaming alabaster, gushing water in full fountain glory.

The carillon, whose bells haven't been heard in decades, tolling on the hour.

The floral clock — which marks the end of the bridge and the official entrance to Belle Isle — at once in full, lush bloom and telling time. The correct time.

These wonders — a constellation of events that occurs about as often as the appearance of Halley's comet — might have been a coincidence.

But on that very same day, 390 women — many wearing festive hats and summer frocks and jewelry — gathered for a luncheon on the conservatory grounds to raise money for Belle Isle.

It was an old-school society luncheon with modern twists — a cross-section of powerful and connected women from across Metropolitan Detroit. From Cynthia Ford — Edsel Ford's wife — to Florine Mark, who heads a Weight Watchers empire, from Carlita Kilpatrick to organizer (and wife of DTE's CEO) Sarah Earley, it was the sort of group that might inspire any host to trim the hedges and plant a few more flowers.

Inspired by similar efforts in New York, Boston and other cities with glorious parks in need of attention, Earley set out last year to create a new women's charity specifically to help reclaim Belle Isle — the 19th century masterpiece of landscape architecture that has languished for decades.

The luncheon, on a flawless June day, celebrated the past efforts of Comerica and of Marilyn Tuchow, who founded the Friends of Belle Isle. But Earley was intent on starting something new.

In its first foray, the Belle Isle Women's Committee raised \$200,000 — mostly from corporate sponsors — to erect a new paved promenade at the island's Sunset Point, as the western tip is officially known.

Earley countered arguments that the group should restore the casino, or the stables, or any of the countless dilapidated structures already there. Instead, she sought a project that would let the Belle Isle Women's Committee make an immediate mark.

The turnout was huge, and surely part of the event's success was that it tapped into the collective affection for Belle Isle — a seat of childhood memories that cannot be written off. The island has grown ragged but remains still beautiful in its bones.

Who wouldn't want to save it?

Sarah Earley correctly recognized the passion people have for the place.

And Charles Beckham, the city's recreation department director, should have felt pride as the ladies in high heels made their way across a lawn shorn to country club standards.

He mentioned improvements under way — a \$1 million renovation of the pavilion, new bathrooms, a nature preserve that will provide children with a 21st century alternative to the now-closed children's zoo. The carillon was playing, for the first time in anyone's memory. A ladies' luncheon somehow created synergy.

You could see Belle Isle glittering in the unexpected sunshine with energy and money and goodwill.

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