Reflections from the Executive Director

The journey of our lives is a fascinating conundrum, especially when we look back at all the events along the way that brought us to this particular moment in time. I remember my disappointment at not being accepted into post-graduate school to specialize in psychiatric nursing. I was determined to somehow get my foot in the door, and an opportunity arose to work with handicapped children in a residential unit within the grounds of St. Cléments Psychiatric Hospital in my hometown of Ipswich, Suffolk, England. I was sick with the flu the day of my interview and quite sure they would never hire me. The job was offered to me the next day! I fell in love with those amazing children and decided this was the area I wanted to specialize in. For the next three years, that is what I did.

During that time I met my future husband, an American airman stationed at a nearby base. I had never really given any thought to leaving England, where all my family lived and where I assumed I would always be. Once again, the powers of the universe put a different path in front of me. We got married in England in 1980, two years into my postgraduate training. I finished my specialty three months before delivering our first child, Freddie. He was literally our first anniversary gift. My husband and I were both over the moon at Freddie’s arrival.

In November 1982 we moved everything we owned to the USA. Having left a cold rainy England, I arrived at the Tucson International Airport with a mixture of excitement for this unknown life I was coming to and a very heavy heart at leaving my family behind. My first thought on arriving in Tucson was “who turned the heating up?” Then, after meeting my husband’s family at the airport, we drove through Tucson to their home on the east side. On passing through town, my second thought was, “where are all the people?” It was a major culture shock, to say the least.

We spent the first nine months of 1983 in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, where my husband was stationed. During that time, Freddie had frequent ear infections, and I was dreadfully homesick. My husband, bless him, was doing the best he could to help us through it all. Freddie’s development came to a halt after a particularly bad ear infection. He stopped trying to talk, showed no interest in anything, and started rocking back and forth in the middle of the room. By the time we got back to Tucson I was seven months pregnant, and we both knew our little boy was not progressing the way he should.

My husband left the Air Force in October that year and our daughter, Samantha, was born in November. Two weeks later we moved to Phoenix, and a doctor there referred us to Gompers Rehabilitation Center, where Freddie was seen for speech therapy and occupational therapy. Two of the therapists mentioned autism to me for the first time. I was painful to hear that word in reference to my little boy. I was so angry with the universe, I couldn’t talk to my husband about it. I had to come to my own terms with it first. When I did finally talk to him, his reaction could not have made me feel better. It was mind-blowing. After three months of worrying what that diagnosis could mean, my husband looked straight in the eye and said, “Well, he’s still our Freddie and he will always be.”

In late 1984, we happily moved back to Tucson, where we had the support of my wonderful mother-in-law, “Mama Ella Mae.” Mama helped the whole family understand autism, so that I didn’t have to keep explaining to everyone. I have missed her every day since she passed on in 2008.

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SPRING 2018

SPRING PLANT SALE

Members Sale, March 3
8am-5pm: 20% off to members

General Public Sale, March 6-10
10% off to general public
20% off to members

Top to bottom, Rosettes of Abutilon abutiloides, Clematis drummondii;
Paeonia suffruticosa, Paeonia officinalis, Gaura lindheimeri

SPRING 2018

Nurturing Plants and People Since 1981

Desert Survivors

Public Service Advertisement

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Featured Plants Spring 2018

**Dasyliirion wheeleri** (sotol, desert sotol)

Although we have carried sotol for a long time, at the spring plant sale we will be offering a large number of beautiful one- and five-gallon specimens of this iconic landscape plant. A member of the asparagus family (Asparagaceae), it is a large succulent that usually grows to 5 feet tall and wide, or bigger. Plants will form small trunks and produce flower stalks annually once mature. D. wheeleri is considered dioecious, meaning that plants are either male or female. One of the remarkable things about this species is its distinctive bluish (glaucous) foliage, and full-grown specimens make stunning landscape elements. A great place to view the natural splendor of this plant is on the south side of the Santa Catalina Mountains (places like Pima or Romero Canyon). Sotol benefits from deep soils to establish a strong root system, but is incredibly tough and xeric once established. This species is a larval host for the yucca moth (Mespilopa specul) and also hosts the northern giant flag moth (Dysschema howardi), a very large tiger moth with both black- and white-orange wings. Some indigenous cultures in north-central Mexico use the core of the sotol to make an alcoholic drink, and fibers from its leaves are used for baskets and various other products.

**Muhlenbergia emeryi** (bullbent)

This native, 3-foot tall bunchgrass makes an excellent, low-maintenance landscape feature. It typically forms dense clumps grazed by an abundance of largely unbranched stalks with attractive pink or light-purple panicles in August and September. After flowering, the color of the inflorescence fades to a tan, and in wintertime even the dormant phase of bullbent is striking. Unlike its riparian relative, deerbent (M. ripens), it grows on dry, rocky slopes, flourishing with little water. In the wild, bullbent is found throughout our Sky Islands between 1,000 and 7,000 feet. Planting two or three of these in your yard will make a particularly stunning landscape. In general, grasses provide great habitat for birds and quality forage for wildlife, including many birds. Bullbent is also a strong larval host for an assortment of butterflies, including Nabolokov’s saty (Cytops pyrocamon), red-bordered saty (Grylconus patrobos), moon-marked skipper (Atrytonopus lunus) and the large roadside skipper (Amblyscirtes exotensis). Processed seeds of M. emeryi make an edible and highly nutritious grain for humans.

**Agropyron saba** (rough bentgrass)

A new offering at the nursery, rough bentgrass (Poaceae family) is native across a wide geographic range, including much of North America and Asia. Regionally, it is a tufted bunchgrass found between elevations of 1,000 and 9,000 feet, occurring in canyons, meadows, and streambeds. This species blooms during our monsoon season, producing attractive, delicate, reddish inflorescences. The plants grow quickly and require moderate water-use in cultivation. They are relatively small, typically growing to only a foot wide and several feet tall. Rough bentgrass is a larval host for the Taxi’s skippers (Poanes taxilies).

**Reflections**

I am thrilled that Richard Bechtold is still here to help me through this transition. He is working part-time as our financial officer. I am forever grateful to him for his guidance and friendship over the last twenty-three years. Also, our board of directors is a wonderful group of people who care so much about Desert Survivors, and I am honored that they have given me this opportunity.

As my journey continues, I am enjoying all the exciting ideas, projects and new directions we are investigating at Desert Survivors. I am so lucky to work with the best of the best in the nursery and service business. Together we will continue to make Desert Survivors the best plant nursery and group supported horticultural employment organization in the Southwest. Thank you all—our members, our clients and their families; the amazing Stonewall Foundation; Pima County; the Tucson Downtown Partnership; Gibson’s Nursery; and the person that just came in to buy a plant and got handed this newsletter! Without your support, we could not do what we do best.

Karen Wilson
Executive Director

Our River Park Loop crew and mentors break for the camera alongside our Pima County partners.

**Changing of Hands**

You may have read by now that Karen has taken the reins from me this year. So I am writing to you in my new capacity as Desert Survivors financial officer, and advisor to Karen. I am so pleased to remain engaged with these special programs, but I admit that this new-retirement is wonderful! I have more time to spend with my wife and family, and when I get home after work, my responsibilities are over for the day and my mind is free! It is a liberating feeling after 40 years in the office.

I am also happy to report that Desert Survivors finances remain solid. The Tax Credit Campaign was a huge success—netting $54,000 this year. It appears that with the increases in the amount eligible for the credit, many people are splitting the credit with their other charities. Many other members have given us their entire credit allowance, and we are grateful for all of our member donations. In addition to our members, many of the families of our clients made substantial donations. Thank you all so much!

In the coming years, Desert Survivors will face challenges with the stepped increases in minimum wage. All of our workers with disabilities are paid $15 an hour, yet their work at the nursery and at several locations around the city, and we now employ more than 45 clients. The use of State funds that support services to persons with disabilities requires constant oversight and attention. Currently, 60% percent of our funding comes from the State, 30% from business contracts and retail sales, and 10% from donations.

As always, I am available to answer questions about our finances, donations, and memberships. I am in the office regularly on Monday mornings between 8 a.m. and noon, but if you need me sooner, just call. My direct number is 520-699-8333.

Rich Bechtold
Financial Officer

**Our newsletter photos by Jim Verrier, unless otherwise noted.**