

Meet the New Volunteer Coordinator

BY DONNA AHRENS

The 2017 season will be Jennifer Dunne's third as a volunteer and her first as volunteer coordinator for the Martha E. Crone Shelter at the heart of the Wildflower Garden. She assumed the role at the end of the 2016 season, when former coordinator Lauren Husting returned to doctoral studies at the University of Minnesota.

Asked about her history with the Garden, Jennifer explains, "I came here with both my grandmas—one lived in Uptown and the other, in Golden Valley—when I was growing up. Even though at times I rolled my eyes at the idea of looking at flowers, *again!*, those visits were a precious part of my childhood."

Four years ago, after raising their kids in southwest Minneapolis, Jennifer and her husband moved to the Bryn Mawr neighborhood, adjacent to Theodore Wirth Park. They enjoyed hiking in the park, and one day they chose to walk to the Wildflower Garden. Jennifer hadn't visited there for several decades, and she recalls that tears came to her eyes as they walked the trails. "I had these childhood memories of the Garden, I'd been a hiker on the outside [of it]—and here was this protected treasure on the *inside*." Soon after, she decided to volunteer, welcoming visitors at the shelter.

Jennifer admits that despite her love of the Garden, she's no expert on wildflowers. "I know perennials from working on my own garden," she says, "but I had no history with wildflowers" when she started volunteering. Now she's learning. "My goal this year is to go on all the naturalist-led walks [for shelter volunteers]," she declares, adding, "Those walks are one of the biggest benefits of volunteering."

Among the other benefits is the opportunity to learn not just from the naturalists but also from visitors to the Garden. "I've been surprised at how many international visitors we have, as well as people from all over the United States," she says.

The visitor shelter's schedule also offers volunteers considerable flexibility. "People can choose to work every afternoon on a certain day, once or twice a month, or on an as-needed basis," Jennifer says. She describes the volunteers as "interesting, interested, and smart. It's a great little fellowship of people who bring quality, talents, and respect" to the Garden's operations.

Jennifer notes that the Garden's volunteers have always played an important role in the organization—and continue to do so. "Last year, there were 392 shifts [from April through October], and we filled 367 of those! That's 94 percent, and we think we'll do even better this year." She's looking forward to welcoming volunteers old and new at the orientation session in April.

Asked if she has a favorite season or flower at the Garden, Jennifer demurs. "That's like asking someone to select their favorite child! I might start to say 'It's spring,' but then I'd think, 'No, midsummer,' and then, 'Oh, it's fall, when the Garden starts to go to sleep.' I can't pick a favorite."

Why is the Garden special to her? Jennifer pauses, then says, "It's such a nice place to feed our spirit. ... I feel like we have to guard against the negative input in our lives. To have

good output, we need to have quiet—a time when we can listen to the trees rustle, watch the birds flying around us, and focus on the natural environment."

And, just like her grandmothers, she plans to pass along the gift of the Garden to her grandchildren. Grandson Will is 18 months old, and another grandchild is on the way. She laughs. "When they get older, I plan to tell them that the shelter is my cabin."

—Donna Ahrens is copyeditor of the *Fringed Gentian*



Jennifer Dunne