



Jane (center) with Gerard Tsutakawa and Foundation staff at the celebration of the restored Tsutakawa Gates in 2022. (Photo by Spike Mafford)

Seven Transformative Years

An Interview with Jane Stonecipher about Her Tenure as Director of the Arboretum Foundation (2017–24)

BY NIALL DUNNE

ND: Do you have a favorite spot in the Arboretum?

JS: I always feel like this question is akin to choosing a favorite child! But there are two different spots I am drawn to, both of which I consider to be my “thinking places.” One is the stone bench in the Centennial Garden. I like it because it looks up at the Olmsted-era Overlook Gazebo, and also at the newly restored areas of lower Rhododendron Glen. I like the connection with history and watching people interact around the pond, as well as just thinking about the progress we’ve made in the Glen.

The other spot is the bench on the north hillside of the Japanese Garden, where you can look out across the pond and get a view of the

whole space. You’re not just seeing all of the Garden, but also the larger Arboretum beyond. It’s like looking at a seasonal painting—one that’s a kaleidoscope of different colors in the spring and 50 shades of green in the summer. And, of course, it’s spectacular in the fall, too!

ND: What do you consider to be the main accomplishments of your seven years as executive director of the Foundation? List four.

JS: Here goes—and in no particular order: The first accomplishment, is our partnership with the Aldarra Foundation, founded by Bill and June Boeing. It started with an exploratory phone call in 2018 from an anonymous donor (June), who was passionate about the Arboretum, and it ended up being a six-million-dollar funding partnership—that has touched most of the great progress that has happened here over the last six years.

An element of that partnership I’m particularly proud of is the concept of a sustaining fund. Aldarra—along with another longtime friend of the Arboretum—has helped us create five new horticulture positions, which have made a huge difference in visitor experience and the health of the plant collections. Looking forward, the

“At my first meeting with Jane, she asked ‘What do you need?’ and ‘What does the Arboretum need from the Foundation?’ She carried that spirit with her through all of our planning and projects, great or small. All of the great things we’ve done the last seven years were made possible due to her thoughtful and considered collaboration.”

— Ray Larson, Curator and Associate Director,
UW Botanic Gardens

sustaining fund is a mechanism that enables the positions to continue for the next decade, until they can be permanently funded from another source. It feels like a big step towards sustainable care of the Arboretum.

The second is the \$28 million agreement between WSDOT and Seattle Parks for the future North Entry of the Arboretum—to restore the 28 acres of land returning to the park around the end of the decade. This was teed up by the earlier 520 mitigation agreement in 2013 that enabled the creation of the Loop Trail. But there was not a lot of specificity about phase two of mitigation and how the WSDOT project timeline would effect the settlement. With Seattle Parks as the lead, we—along with UW Botanic Gardens—were able to negotiate a much larger settlement with WSDOT. More importantly, the project is funded up front, which will allow the balance to grow and the planning to begin. The fiscal certainty gives us a platform to be able to go out and generate other resources and start the work much faster.

The third is the unlocking of a new revenue source, namely state legislative funding. It allowed us to design and execute—under the leadership of Seva Workshop—the comprehensive 2023 community survey. The survey, which took into account the desires of a larger constituency of community members, will be the basis for a lot of future planning and decisions for the Arboretum.

And, lastly, the fourth accomplishment is the renewal of our operating agreement with the City for the Japanese Garden. It will take us through 2032 and has given us the momentum to launch the North Wall and Pavilion Project, which completes elements of the original vision for the Garden that were imagined back in 1959 but never finished. For me, it has been super exciting to understand more about the history of the Garden and to think about completing the final element of the plan envisioned by Juki Iida all those years ago.

ND: What project was the most personally meaningful for you?

JS: The recreation of the Tsutakawa Gates was most meaningful because it was so

“One of the true marks of a transformational leader is the ability to establish enduring traditions. Here at the Arboretum, Jane has been able to do just that, and we continue to reap the benefits. There is the tradition of accountability, the tradition of stewardship, and the tradition of respect and collegiality.”

— Peter Rees, Former Foundation Board President

symbolic—bookending the Covid pandemic. The original gates were stolen and destroyed three days after the Visitors Center had to close to the public in March of 2020; restoration was completed two years later. And we were able to celebrate the gates in their new, more prominent home, where they now welcome visitors into the main thoroughfare of the Arboretum down Azalea Way. Working with the Tsutakawa family and the Seattle Office of Arts and Culture—and just seeing the outpouring of public support to make the project happen—was really special.

ND: What singular development during your tenure makes you most proud?

JS: The agreements with WSDOT and Seattle Parks and Recreation for the North Entry. I believe this project is going to shape the second century of the Arboretum, and it is such a huge opportunity for the City and the region. I think we built a really successful runway that’s going to allow that project to have a wonderful trajectory.

ND: You helped shepherd the Arboretum through the Covid pandemic, adapting the Foundation’s programs and fundraising during a difficult few years. What lessons did you take away from that experience?

JS: I feel like the Arboretum and the Foundation weathered the pandemic better than many organizations. That’s not to say that it wasn’t hard—figuring out about PPP loans and closing facilities, and the gates being stolen. All of that was a set of punches to the gut. But the pandemic did reaffirm for a lot of people how important the Arboretum is. And that’s just something we heard over and over again: About how this place was

a saving grace for many people—to have it as a refuge. I’m also super proud of the way that the Arboretum team showed up.

We kind of cringe now when we hear the word “pivot,” but that’s what we had to do: a pretty immediate switch to taking all our meetings online; two virtual galas; and all the virtual programs we started in order to stay connected, to each other and our constituents. The Japanese Garden was actually the first Parks facility that closed, and the first one to reopen! And so there were lots of things to figure out about social distancing and timed ticketing—all the things that make you shudder a little bit now. But the Garden became a model that was used for the rest of the Parks system, and I’m proud we were a part of that.

ND: During your tenure, we saw a commission for Paul Chihara to compose music celebrating the Japanese Garden’s 60th anniversary, the installation of John Grade’s sculpture in the park, and much more. Is public art important to you? And how can it help advance the mission of the Arboretum?

JS: Yes, I am a big fan of public art. One of the things I like about it is that it’s a way to see nature in new ways, through the lens of the artist. And it’s also a conversation starter. You may love it, you may not love it, but it’s making you think and talk about it. Some visitors come to the Arboretum just to see the public art—and then they get exposed to all the other wonders we offer here. One of my favorite recent events was part of our new “Music in the Arboretum” series, which showcased classical Indian dance and music. It was a window into a different culture and wonderful to

see it in the setting of the Arboretum.

ND: What are some key takeaways from the 2023 state-funded community survey? And what are some next steps that the Arboretum is working on?

JS: Some of the results were not surprising. We know, for example, that there are challenges with public transit to the Arboretum. But we also really heard the desire for a broader range of programs, particularly for folks who might not come often. They see programs as an entry ramp to understanding the space. We also saw a lot of support for centering tribal voices in spaces, like Foster Island, that are considered sacred to the tribes—and, overall, just wanting a stronger sense of welcome. I do think that we’re going to be able to incorporate many of those desires—better wayfinding, interpretation, facilities, and venues for programming—as capital improvements are prioritized moving forward.

ND: Part of your legacy will be the work that’s been done over the last few years to refresh the organizational structure of the Arboretum—moving it towards a single, unified non-profit entity. What benefits will such an entity bring?

JS: One thing that has always been unusual about the Arboretum, versus just about any other similar organization across the country, is that it’s a three-way partnership. And even when it’s working well—as it has been in the past years—it does require a more inward focus for working and coordinating with each other.

We’re entering a time of tremendous promise with the North Entry, and it behooves us to be

Jane at the spring plant sale in 2017 with Arboretum Foundation volunteer JoAnn Clark.



“True to the aphorism, ‘People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel,’ Jane’s quiet leadership and her innate ability to genuinely make people feel included, heard and valued have been keys to her success for the past seven years.”

– Sherrey Luetjen, Former Foundation Board President



Jane at the 2024 gala with Seattle Parks superintendent AP Diaz and UW Botanic Gardens director Christina Owen.
(Photo by Alabastro Photography)

“Jane’s talent in relationship building has been at the heart of the Foundation’s successful fundraising, generating more than \$27 million during her tenure in support of capital projects, maintenance of our world-class collections, Arboretum membership, and volunteer programming.”

– Jennifer Wyatt, Former Arboretum Foundation Board President

outwardly focused on how we can best deliver on this huge opportunity. What excites me most about the 28 acres is that it’s a generational opportunity to create what amounts to a new park in the urban core, one that connects natural lands to the north around Union Bay and the Center for Urban Horticulture, as well as to the south, in the existing Arboretum and Japanese Garden.

Like Seattle’s current waterfront projects being a connector on the western side of the city, our project represents a chance to change the map on the eastern side, particularly near the new transportation nexus at Montlake. Having an organization that is clearly branded and focused on expanded programming and strategic resource generation will be necessary to take advantage of

“When we think of legacy, we often think about the physical contributions and capital projects, especially for a space like the Arboretum. But sometimes I think the more impactful legacies are those of culture and character. Jane will leave all three.

– Christina Owen, Director, UW Botanic Gardens



what will be an ambitious and complex undertaking—one that will help shape the city in the coming decades and the Arboretum for its next generation. Just like people in the 1930s, who needed to have a lot of creativity and imagination to bring the Arboretum to life in the first place, we have an opportunity to transform and magnify this wonderful asset and resource for all to enjoy in the 21st century.

ND: And what is your new role as director emerita in this?

JS: My role will be to help get the nitty-gritty agreements over the finish line—and to help set up an augmented nonprofit for a sustainable and successful future.

ND: What advice would you give to someone thinking of pursuing a career in public garden leadership?

JS: When I think of my own career, which has zigzagged from public accounting to wireless and tech to nonprofit leadership, I realize that you learn something different from each opportunity. And to be a successful leader, you have to draw on all those lessons that you’ve learned, even if it seems like they are never going to fit together. Sometimes the more circuitous path ends up serving you better in the final analysis, as long as you continue to learn. 🍷

Jane at her farewell party with Foundation board presidents past and present: Sherrey Luetjen, Maribeth O’Connor, Jason Morse and Peter Rees.

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