

Therapeutic garden provides respite during pandemic

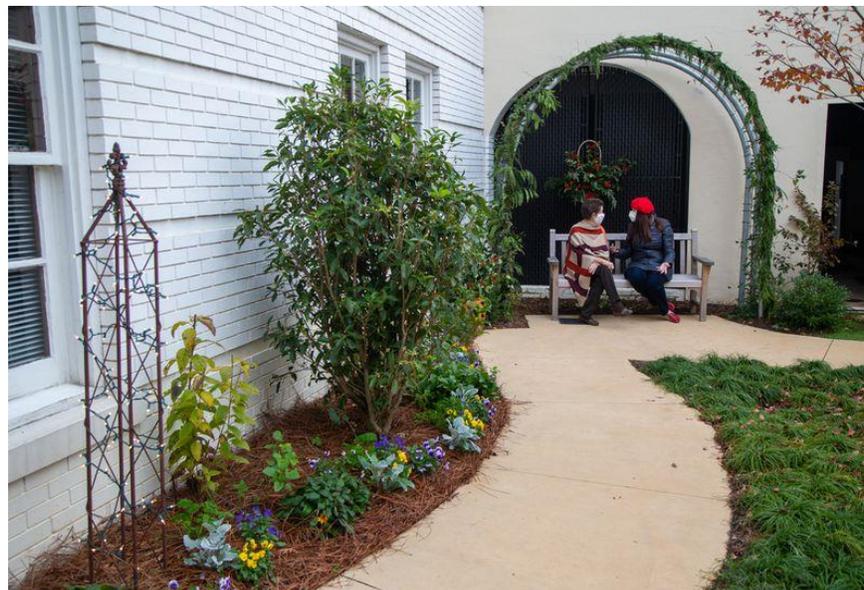
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By Laura Berrios, For the AJC

In honor of two women named Sarah, oasis serves Alzheimer's respite care families.



Buckhead has a new, green oasis – a small, urban botanical garden masterfully designed by famed Atlanta architect Edward L. Daugherty.

Sarahs' Garden will enhance the programming of Respite Care Atlanta, a faith-based Alzheimer's respite care group formed by eight Buckhead congregations. At the Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church, the therapeutic garden provides a safe, relaxing outdoor space for RCA families and gardening activities members.



It's also a gift to the city. Passersby along East Wesley Road can see it through the wrought-iron fencing beside Second-Ponce church.

"It's a beautiful jewel in the heart of Buckhead," said RCA founder Harriet Schaffer. "It's a gift to the church, a gift to the city. I'm just blown away at how gorgeous it is."

Schaffer founded the respite program after her husband, Charlie Schaffer, was diagnosed with Alzheimer's a decade ago. Schaffer, a prominent Atlanta attorney and leading citizen, was outspoken about his disease to support research and raise awareness. The Schaffers wanted to create a program to stimulate those with dementia and give rest to the caregiver.

Schaffer's disease has progressed, so he could not attend RCA which opened in 2019, but his wife said he would have loved it, especially the garden.

Sarahs' Garden provides a way to bring the outside in for members, said Carter Morris, RCA garden chair. Landscape architect Daugherty took on the project non gratis and "thought of everything from our member's point of view," Morris said.



He created paths to entice exploration and an old-fashioned wooden arbor to evoke memories. A Fragrant Tea Olive bush will grow tall and wide, hiding perennials and herbs so guests will have to get up and walk over to see what's behind.

"It is meant to titillate you and cause you to move," Daugherty said.

January jasmine creeps over the wall like a beard, and a single crape myrtle is a centerpiece sculpture offering something new each season, Daugherty explained.

"Plants are not static. They sing and dance all year round. They're always doing something," he said.

RCA programming has been online during the pandemic, but when members get back on the campus of Second-Ponce church, they'll have potting and seeding activities. Cooking classes and demonstrations will use vegetables and herbs from the garden.



Sarahs' Garden gets its name from Sarah Kennedy and Sarah Clarke, who formed one of Atlanta's first Alzheimer's support groups.

The Atlanta Alzheimer's Auxiliary came together in 1998 to bring awareness of the disease and raise funds for local research at Emory University.

Known as the "two Sarahs," Kennedy and Clarke were the best of friends, and at the time, both women cared for a parent with Alzheimer's. Recognizing the lonely journey, Sarah Clarke wanted to do something to help families dealing with the disease.

"We were all sort of really, really devoted to one another," Kennedy said of the auxiliary members. "We were there for each other because we've all taken that walk at some point in time."

Sarah Clarke passed away in August 2019, but her daughters, Katie Martin and Mary Mac Southerland said their mother would have been thrilled about the garden and honored to have it named in her memory.

"Mom loved being out in nature, taking long walks every day. She was extremely passionate about the fight against Alzheimer's and the search for a cure. This subject was very near and dear to her heart," Martin said.

Like the auxiliary, RCA is a group of friends supporting one another. Most members and volunteers have known each other for years, as neighbors or through church and community activities.

"Harriet's goal, and my goal, is to see more of these centers sprout throughout the city so that families will have a place to drop off their loved one and be able to do something for themselves," Kennedy said.

"Wouldn't it be wonderful for more and more churches to have a center on their property?"



WHAT INSPIRES ABOUT SARAHS' GARDEN

Almost all of the plants were donated by Respite Care Atlanta volunteers or member families. They took clippings from their own gardens and replanted them, said Carter Morris, garden chair.

By late summer, the garden was blooming with ripe cherry tomatoes and various flowers, herbs and perennials.

A May garden dedication ceremony was canceled because of the pandemic. RCA families can visit the garden by appointment, and it can be viewed from the street along the fencing at Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church, 2715 Peachtree Road at the corner of East Wesley Road.

Donations to RCA or Sarahs' Garden can be made at www.respitecareatlanta.org/