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Local touring company combines a love of gardens with English history

By Sophie Braccini



A modern 9-acre Sussex garden with great drifts of colorful flowers and wispy grasses. Photo Darron Brackenbury

Sometimes an individual's life path can gain meaning when they embark on a new adventure where all the facets of their previous experiences seem to coalesce. Once her children reached college age, longtime Moraga resident, Contra Costa master gardener, and former parks and recreation professional Gillian Gray embarked on such a journey, creating Rose and Heather Tours, a company that takes people through well-known as well as secret gardens of Sussex and Kent. The British woman is now spreading her wings and developing what she loves.

Saying that Gray loves gardens is an understatement. At age 9, she visited the Arundel Castle and Gardens in West Sussex, England, where she experienced her first sense of unique completeness. She was living with her family in Sussex at the time, and she says that the feeling of joy always stayed with her. Over the years, she visited many more gardens in Sussex and Kent, discovering private gardens off the beaten path – some whimsical, some uniquely creative – and she selected those that had the beauty she felt would most satisfy discriminating travelers and garden lovers.

The diversity and the richness of the gardens Julie Stokstad saw during a Rose and Heather Tour was the highlight of her vacation. A fellow docent at the UC Botanical Garden, Stokstad went on the

breakout trip Gray organized last August. She said that her favorite days were when she saw three different gardens in one day. "One had so many salvia, which is one of my favorite plants," she says. "Another one was created around ruins, with different layers created by incredible tree strata." She remembers one that was composed with beds of different plants with the same color – one yellow, one orange, one red – and included different textures, heights and graphics. In the more private gardens, she said most people visiting there were British, and there were no big crowds; being off of the beaten path really pleased her.

Stockstad was met by her son during the trip. The young man, who lives in England and also enjoys gardens, also appreciated the historical aspect of the trip. Gray includes historical, and/or literature discoveries on her trips so people can indulge in different types of intellectual pleasures, such as meditating in the garden Churchill liked to stroll, or staying in a hotel that was first patronized by Queen Elizabeth I over five centuries ago.

Stockstad also appreciated Gray's command for logistics and how quickly she works to satisfy her clients. One of the historical accommodations felt on the very small side to Stockstad, and since the trip is designed to provide luxurious accommodations, Gray inter-

vened and made changes to please Stockstad.

Gray explains that part of her career in England, after getting her degrees in environmental science and business, was working for the Parks and Recreation Department of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. She says that this is where she learned how to make people happy and solve all kinds of problems.

Her tours accommodate 10 to 14 people for 11 days and 10 nights, touring in an executive mini-bus and staying in unique local high-class hotels. Some garden tours are guided, others are self-paced; Stockstad said she really enjoyed the freedom of the self-guided tours.

Gray began the tour company almost two years ago; she created a business plan, made comparative studies with other tour operators, conducted focus groups, worked on her marketing plan, and constructed her website. Before the first breakout tour, Gray made two test visits to select the accommodations, the food options, choose the right bus company and fine-tune her logistics.

The next two Rose and Heather Tours are scheduled for May 7-17 and May 28-June 7. There is an early bird discount for people registering before Jan. 30. For information, visit www.rose-and-heather-tours.com.

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Free classical concert at SMC Chapel, Jan. 26



Ensemble ARI

Ensemble ARI, a group of Korean American musicians in the Bay Area dedicated to bridging Korea and other communities through western instruments while honoring Korean history and culture, will be collaborating with Calxstone, an early music ensemble that specializes in the music of Western Europe from the 13th through the 15th centuries, for a performance at 8 p.m. Jan. 26 in the Saint Mary's College Chapel.

Ensemble ARI was founded by two Orinda musicians, composer Jean Ahn and pianist Sharon Lee Kim, and includes five other musicians dedicated to classical music that connects to the community.

Ahn, who is the Ensemble ARI director, holds a Ph.D. from UC Berkeley as well as master's and bachelor's degrees from Seoul National University, and has been recognized, awarded, and honored by many. Her compositions have been featured at Aspen New Music Festival, American Composers Orchestra's Ear Shot (by Memphis Symphony), June in Buffalo, Oregon Bach Festival, Etchings Festival, Festival of Contemporary Music, IAWM, Berkeley Symphony Under Construction, Pacific Korean Music Festival, and College Music Society Conferences, among others. Ahn is also the assistant director of UC Berkeley Chamber

Chorus, is currently lecturing at UC Davis and has taught at UC Berkeley, University of the Pacific and Dominican University.

Calxstone, which will perform Renaissance music using big recorders and a lute, includes Allison Zelles Lloyd, voice and harp; Frances Blaker, recorder and hammered dulcimer; Letitia Berlin, recorder, douçaine and psaltery; Shira Kammen, vielle, harp and voice.

Strings will play with non vibrato, as if they are gut strings (in the style of 15th century), says Ahn. The free concert will feature music by Brahms, Gordon, and 15th century German composers.

– J. Wake