

Jennifer ROMINIECKI

Marie Selby Botanical Gardens is marking its 40th anniversary this year and has a new CEO

- Jennifer Rominiecki.

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Sarasota has many cultural gems that are revered by those who are full-time residents and are must-see sites and activities for visitors. For 40 years Marie Selby Botanical Gardens has been on the short list that residents and tourists visit to enjoy the plethora of plant life, family activities, and the overall ambience of the Sarasota Bay location that the organization calls “a tropical urban oasis.”

Upon their arrival in the 1920s Marie and William Selby purchased a seven-acre finger of land bounded by Sarasota Bay and Hudson Bayou where Marie Selby cultivated lush gardens. The significance of the Selbys would be evident years later when their estate became a botanical garden that opened to the public in 1975.

Now encompassing 15 acres and noted not only as a beautiful place to spend a day, but also for its educational, family-friendly, research, and conservation activities, Selby Gardens is headed by Jennifer Rominiecki who was hired this year. The upcoming 40th anniversary of Selby Gardens provides an opportunity for visibility with special programs that begin in July and culminates with a significant orchid exhibition that opens on the evening of the signature Orchid Ball in February 2016.

“I’m proud to say I’m President and CEO of Selby Gardens and ready to lead the organization to the next level of excellence and growth. I’m ready to create a new vision and to achieve that vision. After management positions in the visual arts at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, in performing arts at The Metropolitan Opera, and in living art at The New York Botanical Garden, I feel my interdisciplinary experience led me to this position. I majored in art history in college so this community was especially attractive to me,” Jennifer says.

Jennifer is passionate about cultural organizations because of the enrichment they bring to the human experience, but the reality is they also need support. She thinks of herself as the head of a museum of living plants where it’s her responsibility to create experiences so people will want to come back time and again to become members, shop, and dine. “My first priority is to make sure the organization is financially sound. My second priority is to shore up the infrastructure of buildings and glass houses that is a significant investment,” she explains “I also need to assure that an endowment will sustain the organization for the future. Achieving these goals will build visibility and awareness of the world-class treasure that is Selby Gardens. I have launched a strategic planning process that is bottom up rather than top down giving all levels of staff an opportunity to voice their needs.”

When asked about Jennifer, Cathy L. Layton, Chair of the Board of Trustees, commented that, “We already had the most talented, internationally-respected leadership team at Selby Gardens. What was missing is a visionary who not only could articulate a vision, but who had the experience to implement such a vision. Jennifer was the answer to our organizational prayers. Her first task is to ensure that we are maximizing our earned revenue. From there, we will create a campus master plan. How satisfying it is to be engaged with Selby Gardens at such a formative time.”

When asked what makes Selby Gardens unique, Jennifer relates some interesting

facts and figures of which the community is probably not aware. Upon Marie Selby’s death in 1971 when her home and land was given to the community, the new Board of Directors conferred (ironically) with The New York Botanical Garden and the University of Florida and decided that the garden would focus on epiphytes—commonly called “air plants” that grow on other plants. Jennifer also cites the breath, scope, and rarity of the orchid collection; the imposing banyan trees; the rare book collection with 17th century masterpieces; the herbarium of preserved plants; the spirit collection; and the bromeliad collection. She is also enthusiastic about the Ann Goldstein Children’s Rainforest Garden that attracts families with its tree-house experience with a waterfall, swaying bridges, research station, and a canyon.

Many people are not aware of the internationally respected collections and research coordinated in a bungalow across the street from the main gardens by Bruce Holst, Director of Botany; Dr. Antonio Toscano de Brito, curator of orchid research; and Laurie Birch who maintains the information associated with the plant collections at Selby. The research they conduct focuses on understanding plant diversity, classification, and distribution in the wild and coordinating international data with other botanical gardens, universities, and natural history museums on where plants grow in nature and threats to them.

They also loan out plant specimens from the vast collections. With partners such as a university or a private botanical garden, staff has or is currently conducting field work in Brazil, Belize, and Venezuela. The small staff (along with many volunteers) are responsible for the herbarium that stores 110,000 catalogued dried pressed plants dating from 1878 in a climate-controlled building, the 30,000 three-dimension “pickled flowers”—mostly orchids—that are stored in ethanol—a collection that ranks second only to the Kew Royal Botanic Gardens in London, England. Another area is the research and reference library for research scientists and horticulturists.

Describing herself as dedicated, hard-working, creative, and outgoing, Jennifer says she’s a good listener. The latter is an important key to building relationships and to knowing what the constituency wants. She’s challenged by her desire to make everyone happy but knows that there are times that she has to make decisions based on what’s best for the organization. And that can take time.

Born in New York City and raised in New Jersey and Westchester County, New York, Jennifer met her husband Robert while both were working at the Guggenheim Museum; however, they didn’t date until she left to work at the Metropolitan Opera. A son, Luke, is nine and is a student at Southside Elementary School while Noah who is almost five years old, attends preschool at Forty Carrots Family Center. Robert is a stay-at-home father who Jennifer says made it possible for her career to take this trajectory to Sarasota.

With an infectious personality and commitment to defined goals, Jennifer is already a significant player in the cultural scene of Sarasota. With staff and volunteers, her leadership will undoubtedly lead to a more vibrant and dynamic gem that is Marie Selby Botanical Gardens. 🍷

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