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Rose of Saratoga: Garden dedicated to philanthropist Marylou Whitney (with photos, video)

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SARATOGA SPRINGS — A throng of local people gathered Friday in Congress Park as they have for years on the day before the Whitney Handicap, to watch Marylou Whitney's grand entrance into the Canfield Casino for her annual gala.

This time, however, the occasion was the dedication of a rose garden in her honor.

"I'm here because of how much she has done for the community. She's a beautiful person in every way. She and John are remarkable," said Patti Osborne of Saratoga Springs, referring to Whitney and her husband, John Hendrickson.

The privately funded garden, primarily the doing of Whitney's good friends Maureen and Ed Lewi, contains pink, scented long-stem "Marylou Whitney" roses that Hendrickson had commissioned as an 85th birthday gift for his wife.

"I'm so delighted to be here to see the beginning of the Marylou rose garden," Whitney, dressed in pink, said during the dedication ceremony. "I hope all of you will enjoy seeing this rose."

Mayor Scott Johnson spoke of Whitney's generosity and community involvement over the years, citing her role in the founding of the Saratoga Performing Arts Center and the National Museum of Dance; her support for Saratoga Hospital, the Saratoga Regional YMCA, and countless local nonprofits; and, most recently, founder of the Saratoga Backstretch Appreciation Program, which provides activities every night for the people who work with the horses at Saratoga Race Course. He also noted her role in the world of horse racing, particularly the Thoroughbred Retirement Fund, mentioning her receipt of the 2010 Eclipse Award of Merit, one of the racing industry's highest honors.

"Our city thanks you, Marylou, for all that you have done," Johnson said.

Public Works Commissioner Anthony "Skip" Scirocco, who oversaw establishment of the

garden, also offered words of praise from the podium — sentiments that were clearly felt among the approximately 300 people who turned out to share the moment.

“We came to the gala every year,” said Sally Florence of Saratoga Springs, who enjoyed watching Whitney and guests arrive. She also enjoyed the entertainment Whitney always arranged for onlookers. “She’s brought so much to Saratoga.”

“She’s got real class,” Mary Quandt of Saratoga Springs said.

“She is still the most beautiful woman,” Eileen Hale of Saratoga Springs said.

“Marylou has done so much for racing and Saratoga,” horse owner Tracy Farmer said. He and his wife have known Whitney for some 40 years.

The feeling is mutual.

“Marylou has many loves, but Saratoga Springs is her first love,” John Hendrickson said during the ceremony.

City officials and the Lewises agreed that the park, next to the Casino, was an appropriate place to pay homage to Whitney in light of the decades that her gala drew so much attention to Saratoga Springs.

The invitation-only black-tie party, always with a different theme, began decades ago when she and her then-husband, the late C.V. Whitney, were trying to liven things up in Saratoga Springs. After one particularly steamy evening, they donated money to the city to air condition the Casino, now a popular venue for parties year-round. The rose garden is a stone’s throw from a memorial in the park created in the 1990s to honor C.V. Whitney.

The idea for a Marylou Whitney rose originated with friend Jane Wait, the driving force behind the gardens at Yaddo, the artists’ retreat in Saratoga Springs where Marylou Whitney roses have also been planted.

Helping Whitney admirers keep cool under Friday’s noontime sun were privately funded favors — wooden-handled fans and bottled water, both bearing pictures of Whitney and the Marylou Whitney rose. Reggies Red Hot Feet Warmers, a band familiar to track-goers, provided festive music. Dehn’s Flowers was offered special thanks for the day.

People collected the favors as souvenirs of the special day, then gathered around the yellow tent for the ceremony.

“Look at all the Saratogians who love her,” Lee Signor of Saratoga Springs said.