

UNION STREET RESIDENTS FINALLY GET THEIR GARDEN *COMMUNITY RALLIES TO HOLD CONTRACTOR TO ITS WORD*

By Craig McGuire

A construction company working on the 4th Avenue water tunnel shaft who many thought was backing out on a community-improvement promise made before the project began has finally come through.



Park Slope residents were growing concerned that Kiska Construction Corporation would not honor a verbal commitment to the community to build a fence outside a public garden on Union Street between 4th and 5th Avenues, which has since been installed.

The \$1,200 wrought iron fence, replacing an existing cyclone and wooden fence in front of the smaller of the two gardens on the block, honors local longtime

resident and community activist Annie Thompson. The lettering “Annie’s Garden” is worked into the iron fencing.

Born in Cobble Hill, the 75-year-old Thompson has lived directly across the street from the site of the garden for 43 years.

In recent years, Thompson was the driving force in securing a grant from the city-funded Operation GreenThumb to establish the gardens.

“This is a wonderful and beautiful place, but that is not the most important thing,” Thompson said. “The most important thing is that it brings the people of this neighborhood together.”

The Garden of Union *(From the NY Dept. of Parks & Recreation)*

The Garden of Union lies on Union Street, but the name derives as much from its character as its location.

The property is composed of two gardens separated by an apartment building. The smaller, located at 540 Union Street, is known as Annie’s Garden for Annie Thomson (b. 1919), the woman whose determination, energy, and spirit was largely responsible for making the garden come to life. Annie’s Garden opened in 1987.

The main space, the Garden of Union, is located at 634-36 Union Street and has been operating since 1979. Both areas are maintained by Parks and garden members, most of whom reside in Park Slope.

Other volunteers come from all over Brooklyn, from Howard Beach to Carroll Gardens to Sunset Park.

The Garden of Union and Annie’s Garden are community gardens with well-developed plantings of vegetables and flowers. The bulk of the land in the main garden is devoted to vegetables, and much attention is paid to the ornamental qualities of vegetables. Flowers and herbs are also integrated with the vegetable plantings.

The garden regularly yields more produce than the members can use, and much of the vegetables are often given away to members of the community and a local soup kitchen.

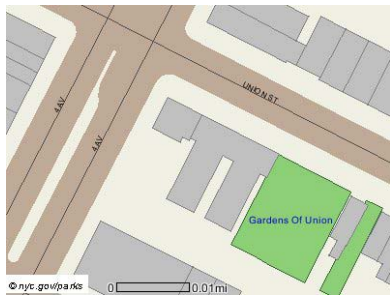
Not only Park Slope have enjoyed the fruits of Thompson's labor.

"We have had people from all over the world stop by and visit the gardens," Thompson said. "Just recently we had a couple of from Ireland and a photographer from Germany come visit."

While never legally obligated to the project, Kiska did fulfill its commitment, following a front-page article from this newspaper that sparked local outrage and generated a campaign.

To its credit, Kiska more than fulfilled its obligation.

"These two gardens are very important to this community," said Huseyon Mutus, Kiska's project coordinator. "Even though our job is completed, we would like to leave a good impression on the community."



In addition to the gate, Kiska has placed 36 trees along Union, Sackett, and President streets.

Phil Delduca, a Union Street resident who helped negotiate with Kiska, said, "The whole idea of these gardens are to get the entire community involved."

Delduca added that students from Public School 107, 1301 8th Avenue, and other area schools visit the gardens regularly.

The gardens are open to the public on Wednesday from 2 pm to dusk, on Saturdays from 10 am to dusk, and varying hours on Sundays.

A party is being planned to officially honor Thompson in May, when the gardens are in full bloom.

When describing her motivation for establishing the gardens of Union," Thompson gives her own special twist on the famous quote from former President John F. Kennedy: "Ask not what your community can do for you; Ask what you can do for your community."

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A rock garden is located in the middle of the main garden, built into the old field stone foundations of the building that once occupied the site.

In the middle of the rock garden is a meditation shrine to Gaia, a homage to scientist James Lovelock's (b. 1919) Gaia Theory (1960s), that proposes that the Earth is a living, self-regulating body. The garden, in bloom nine months of the year, also features a fishpond hidden behind the lush vegetation in the east side of the garden. The Garden of Union was designated a GreenThumb Preservations Site in 1989.

Annie's Garden began operation under a long term GreenThumb lease in 1987. Annie Thompson was the driving force in securing a grant from Trust for Public Land to establish the garden and she nurtured it with her neighbors for over 20 years.

The area features a spruce tree (*Picea spp.*), flowers, and plants along its brick path. It was named "Annie's Garden" during a ceremony in June 1994 honoring Thompson, who had lived across from where the garden now stands for more than 40 years, before moving out of the neighborhood in 1999 at the age of 80.

The wrought-iron fence around the garden, as well as the metal letters spelling "Annie's Garden," were donated by the Kiska Construction Corporation in 1994, fulfilling a verbal commitment made to the community to replace the old chain link and wood fence. In July 1997, the City assigned both gardens to Parks so that they will have support for future improvements.