



The **ARNOLD**
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Dear Friends,

How is excellence achievable? Let me tell a story.

Breakfast was at 2:30 in the afternoon in the lounge of the Carlyle Hotel in New York where she lived. This is how, in 1998, I first met Frances Leventritt, a youngish woman in her early eighties. A month before my visit, she had offered to give her house and ten acres of land on Martha's Vineyard to the Arnold Arboretum. Back then it could have easily netted several millions of dollars in the surging real estate market on the island. However, Frances wanted the property to become a center for land preservation and wildlife conservation. I was meeting her to determine the strength of her intentions.

For reasons of health and inclination, Frances spent most of her time in the hotel, having thirty years earlier lost her husband, Victor Leventritt, a graduate of Harvard's Class of 1935. At night she managed her investments until dawn and then slept well past noon. Several months after our first meeting, I returned to New York to explore her thoughts on her desired use of the property for conservation and whether an alternative closer to Boston might be acceptable. But her commitment to that house and location was characteristically firm and opinionated. I had no choice but to confess that, unfortunately, we were simply not in a position to operate a new conservation center on the Vineyard. I would therefore have to say no to her generous offer of the property. She was not happy.

In an effort to change the subject, I said, "Frances, I would dearly love to interest you in a sun-loving shrub and vine garden."

"What's that?" she asked.

Two years before my first meeting with Frances, the Arboretum had embarked on a solution to a major problem with our living collections. Because our landscape is dominated by very old specimen trees, we had no place to establish shrubs and vines that thrive in direct sunlight. To the east of our Dana Greenhouse lay a steeply sloping tract of land growing an incoherent mixture of declining horticultural specimens. Why not design a new garden here for a collection of sun-loving shrubs and vines?

Through a generous gift from a friend of the Arboretum, we held a small competition among three landscape architectural firms to develop a plan for this garden. Doug Reed and Gary Hilderbrand, partners at Reed|Hilderbrand in Watertown, Massachusetts, won that competition with a design that beautifully integrates a series of terraced beds for shrubs and steel trellises for vines into the sloping hillside with its very challenging change in grade from the Greenhouse to level land thirty feet below. The terraces are created through a series of fieldstone retaining walls and the design is anchored by a magnificent stone wall over 485 feet in length and nearly eight feet high at its tallest. The wall ends at an outdoor teaching pavilion designed by architect Maryanne Thompson. (See images of the garden at www.arboretum.harvard.edu/leventritt.html)

As you might suspect, construction of that much stone wall was going to be expensive. But the design was so beautiful, and the fit with the Arboretum so comfortable, that I uncharacteristically and optimistically gave the

green light for its construction well before I had any idea how the expense would be paid. Two years later, with the start of construction scheduled for the spring, I was sorely in need of a rescue plan for what was looking like a three million dollar problem.

But Frances wasn't interested. Although her husband had been quite horticulturally inclined (the Vineyard property displayed many interesting specimens including an unusual shrubby form of the dawn redwood), Frances was fundamentally clueless about plants and cared much more for animals, particularly dogs. So our conversations, now happening every other month or so, were filled with my own experiences living with dogs, cats, ferrets, and (I'm not kidding!) kangaroos.

Though she had yet to meet them, Frances fell in love with my twin daughters who had also come into the picture two years earlier. Each breakfast included a session in which I shamelessly displayed recent photos of the two most beautiful women in the world. Soon these images began to include toddlers clambering over low fieldstone walls and posing casually next to backhoes and dump trucks.

In 2000, when my girls were three years old, my wife Lee and I drove down to New York City for the holidays and Frances was delighted to meet them for the first time. Although they were still pretty shy around strangers, the stuffed toy dogs from Frances and Shirley Temples from the Carlyle bar overcame any hesitations. She and the girls quickly adopted each other.

One afternoon, nearly four years following my first visit, Frances asked, "So what are you going to plant in this shrub and vine garden?"

"That depends," I said, "on what the benefactor would like to have planted." By the end of the afternoon, she had promised the Arboretum two million dollars for the garden in memory of Victor.

In early September, 2002, we dedicated the completion of construction and planting with a wonderful sunset garden party. Through the efforts of her friends in New York, Frances was driven up to see it for the first time. She was very pleased.

The next day, before returning to New York, she said to me, "You're going to have to take care of this garden now. How can I help?" Back in New York, she established an endowment of one million dollars for its perpetual care.

Frances died on January 15, 2005, and she continued to be generous to the Arboretum in her will.

This fall, the American Society of Landscape Architects bestowed its highest honor, the Award of Excellence, on the M. Victor and Frances Leventritt Garden for its exceptional design and execution.

How is excellence achievable? With your help. Enclosed you will find an opportunity to vote for excellence and I thank you for doing so.

Sincerely,



Robert E. Cook
Director and Arnold Professor