

Green thumb

The Bronx Zoo's new Congo Gorilla Forest looks and feels like the real thing, thanks to landscape contractor Larry Shepps

by Bill Glovin

At seven o'clock in the evening, all but a few security guards have gone home, but Larry Shepps and his crew are working furiously to complete the landscape surrounding the Bronx Zoo's new Lakeside Visitor Center. The center's gift shop is scheduled to open by the weekend, so the pressure is on to transform the once barren lot into a rustic setting reminiscent of an Adirondacks forest.

"For the next hundred years, every visitor who enters the Bronx Zoo will funnel through this area," says Shepps (BS '75). "The fact that I was involved in its creation is very satisfying."

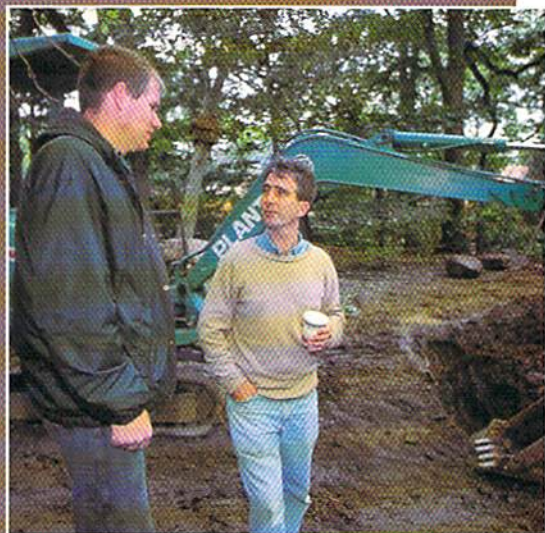
Shepps is the founder and principal of Landscape Management Services Ltd., a New York City firm that has become one of the Bronx Zoo's principal contractors for horticulture projects. The zoo's main restaurant, which is the focal point of the 12-acre Lakeside project, is scheduled to open this fall. Before Shepps' crew planted the trees and ferns and laid the mulch for the areas that surround the restaurant, gift shop, and several outdoor dining pavilions, he and his crew helped create the new Congo Gorilla Forest, one of the most innovative zoo exhibits ever built.

Shepps is delighted to show a visitor his contribution to the forest, which seems a million miles away from the Bronx tenements shielded from view by a huge wall. "Most visitors consider the gorillas and mandrills to be the main attraction, but they're more like window dressing," he says. The guts of the lowland tropical rain forest, Shepps points out, are its 15,000 plants representing nearly 400 species. Many have never been grown in the New York area: African tulip trees with garish yellow flowers; African oil palms, which are of great commercial value but whose fruit gorillas avoid because of the high oil content; Ensete, a wild species of banana; and Celtis, Diospyros, and Vitex.

"We used cranes to drop in trees that were 50 feet high, but other times the space was too tight and we needed 15 men to manually lift a tree and move it into position," says Shepps. "Many of the trees are extremely thorny—so that the gorillas and mandrills won't tear them apart. But their thorns made it harder for us to move and plant them, too."

Even the man-made elements, which include artificial trees and 10 miles of fiberglass vines, were designed to create an authentic rain forest experience. That atmosphere is heightened by the chirping of insects, the croaking of frogs and bird calls, as well as rolling mist and fog, 11 waterfalls, four ponds, and four streams. Along the forest trail are underground buildings that contain interactive exhibits, a learning center that stresses habitat conservation, and a theater.

"I wish all my projects were this fun to work on," says Shepps, who recently moved to Irvington, N.Y., with his wife, Janice, and their two daughters. "When the Congo Gorilla Forest was under construction, I used to tell my little girls, 'How many New York dads can say that they go to work every day in a forest?'"



Shepps (at right/BS '75) and his crew installed 50-foot trees, some of them extremely thorny to prevent gorillas from tearing them apart.

Bill Glovin is assistant editor of *Rutgers Magazine*.

Rugby's on her mind

Laura Cabrera's goal is to make women's rugby an Olympic sport

by Jennifer Rainey (ABJ '00)

Laura Cabrera doesn't have a lot of free time. Between playing for three different women's rugby teams, including the U.S. National Team, studying for her master's degree in physical therapy at the University of Central Arkansas, and working at a local athletic club, she barely has time for this interview.

"I have practices for the club team about four hours a week, but I also have to spend a lot of time training on my own," she says. "And playing on multiple teams can be especially time-consuming." When the highly-ranked U.S. team has a match, Cabrera (BBA '92) has to take time off from school to attend an intensive week-long training session.

"So far, my instructors have been very understanding," she says, "and I've been lucky with my test dates."

A natural athlete, the 31-year-old native of Puerto Rico excels in nearly every sport imaginable—from soccer to waterskiing. But rugby is the sport that's allowed her to live out a childhood dream of representing her country athletically. While playing for the U.S. national team, Cabrera has traveled to Hong Kong and to New Zealand, home of the top-ranked women's rugby team in the world and the Americans' biggest rival.

Cabrera didn't discover her dream sport until she left UGA. After a job as an insurance claims adjuster landed her in Little Rock, she tried out for the Ozark Ladies, a club team. Two years later she was on the Western Territorial Team, and in 1996 she was selected to the U.S. National Team's pool of players. She has been a senior player on the national team for the last two years.

"On the field, Laura is a very driven, take-charge person," says Julie McCoy, coach of the Ozark Ladies and the Western Territorial teams. "You know that when you play our team, you don't kick the ball to Laura Cabrera. She just commands respect."

Cabrera's enthusiasm is contagious. "The first time I saw a rugby match, I thought to myself, 'I can do that,'" she says. "And after my first game, I realized that this is the best sport in the whole world." She hopes that in the future even more people will share her love for the sport.

"Although rugby is gaining popularity in the U.S., it hasn't reached the same level as in other parts of the world," she says. "But they're talking about making women's rugby an Olympic exhibition sport soon. That would be pretty exciting for all of us."

In addition to a lack of fans, female rugby players in the U.S. must also contend with negative stereotypes about the sport. The seeming "win or die" nature of men's rugby has prompted some people to say that women shouldn't participate. But Cabrera maintains that rugby isn't as dangerous as it seems.

"The men tend to be more hostile and violent on the field than the women," she says. "I don't ever think about getting hurt. Women play the sport with more finesse. When everything falls into place, it's like a beautiful work of art on the field."



ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT GAZETTE

Rugby has been called "the ultimate frat," but Cabrera says women play a more artistic version than men.