

Kare 11

Extra: A daughter's tribute to her mom, and to nature

By **Allen Costantini**



Where's the Buzz?

Prairie plants grow tall in the Minnesota summer, but where they grow has been growing shorter. Jane Toleno, 61, of Big Lake knows something is growing more scarce in those wide open spaces, even though Toleno herself, cannot see the problem.

"I can't see them with my eyes at all. My eyes to me are hood ornaments. They're no see-ums."

Although she is legally blind, Toleno can sense that Minnesota (and other states) lack a certain buzz. Bees, butterflies and other winged insects seem to be on "hiatus." Mother Nature needs her flying creatures to "bug" plants and flowers in order to collect and transmit the pollen. It is the "sex" of the plant world and humans depend on it.

Toleno stands on her deck and waves an arm over the open space beyond. "**Pollination is important** because without it we will have the lousiest, most unhealthy, most awful tasting food in the world." Blind since childhood, Toleno relies on her service dog, Pixie, to be her eyes as she easily navigates the system of stairs and landings that carry her from the deck to the yard below. She hesitates only as Pixie pulls back at the head of a flight of stairs. "Alright, Pixie, forward." At her command, the dog slowly leads her down.

The challenge of her situation has not stopped Jane Toleno from holding several jobs, marrying husband Tom, raising two children and graduating Summa Cum Laude from the University of Minnesota.

When the Toleno's retired from Golden Valley to their new 7-acre property in Big Lake three years ago, they had no intention of mowing that much grass. They turned their attention to making their domicile a home for bees and butterflies, those prodigal pollinators. Disease and shrinking habitat have clipped the wings of the pollinator population nationwide.

Aided by local environmental contractors and Sherburne County Conservationists including Resource Conservationist Gina Hugo, they began transforming four acres of their property into restored prairie. Tom Toleno strolls through the waist high flowers they began planting in 2007. "And it's something that is gonna take at least five years to get to where it needs to be."

He understands that most people cannot attempt something on so grand a scale. "Well, they don't have to have a big piece of property to restore their land to natural prairie grasses."

Gina Hugo echoes the concept. "They can plant 100 square feet and that would be **a wonderful start to providing pollinator habitat**. Planting a flowering shrub would be a good start, a Dogwood or a Sand Cherry or a Choke Berry, something native and flowering." She and the Toleno's urge others to remake even the smallest plots of lawn into pollination flowers. "The grasses do not provide much for pollinators at all. In fact, grass is pretty sterile when it comes to life. So, if we take away part of our lawn and plant something that flowers, we're providing esthetics for people, but also, for pollinators, too."

The Toleno's do have some lawn directly adjacent to their house, but in June, they fenced in a 35 by 65 foot section to attract a very specific pollination population - butterflies. A dozen children, pre-teenagers all, arrived to hear a program about pollination and put some muscle into the practice.

The youngsters formed a voluntary platoon to place 2,000 seedlings into a blanket of mulch inside the high chain-link fence. Gina Hugo held out a paint mixing stick to give the young planters a sense of proportion. "Most of the plants that are going to be planted here today are going to go 12 inches apart."

Jane Toleno sits herself and Pixie down on the edge of the crushed granite path that winds through the new garden and listens carefully to the placement of the sprouts. Hugo urges the youngsters to extract individual plants from large plastic flats and get the dirt between their fingers. "See the root system down here? You can loosen that up a bit and then set it in the hole."

There is a good reason for Jane Toleno's blind faith in the power of flora. The seeds of hope for the sightless girl, growing up in Portland, Oregon, sprouted from her early exposure to flowers. It was her mother's teaching device for her blind daughter, who took the instruction to heart. "I love flowers because of those early experiences and the other thing my mother taught me was how to learn. And she'd say, well, smell it, go see it with your ears. See it with everything you have to see with."

Hester Turner, former Dean of Students at Portland's Lewis and Clark College later National Director of the Campfire Girls, and Jane's mother, has seen almost a century of planting seasons come and go. At 92 years, Hester continues to travel the world, visiting Dubai and the Balkans this year. She calls New York City home. Jane Toleno notes that although her mother lives half a continent away, they are close. "I have the sense of my mother's hand on me."

On that planting day in June, Jane, Tom and their platoon of helpers held a ceremony on the deck for their pollinator planting project. One-by-one, the children presented papers and drawings of prairie flowers, reciting bloom times and "fun facts" for each plant. None of them realized the age of the lady watching their presentations at the end of the deck, until she announced her age in a strong and direct voice. She was nine decades senior to some of them and they were amazed. Hester Turner had flown in to see her daughter and son-in-law's newest project.

It was Hester's turn to be surprised. Tom asked everyone to be quiet while he faced his mother-in-law. "Without her contribution to this work here today, we wouldn't be standing here today and, Hester, we want to dedicate this garden to you. We call it the Hester Butterfly Garden!" He held up a wooden plaque that will hover over the fenced in mulch and sprouting flowers to identify the new garden.

Hester was clearly touched by the honor. She exhorted the children. "Come and visit my garden! The butterflies are waiting to have some food, aren't they?"

Hester's Garden is a living "thank you" for a life pollinated with a sense of wonder and inspiration. It is Jane Toleno's tribute to her mother. Choking back emotion, Jane wiped tears from her unseeing eyes. "I thank God everyday for the way my mother said yes to challenges she faced, to curiosity that she had, to journeys that she has taken. By holding my hand when I was little, but not squeezing it tight. She would say here, let me show you something."

Jane Toleno could finally show Hester how her legacy is about to be in full bloom in the garden that bears her name.

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