

EXPLAINING

Fairchild Challenge Sculpture in the Shadow of the U.S. Capitol

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Photos by Diane Franklin

*You think teens can be prickly? Examine the underside of a *Victoria amazonica*, the giant water lily of the Amazon. Because of the qualities it shares with adolescents – buoyancy and resilience, a certain thorny quality combined with undeniable grace – the legendary lily was chosen as the subject of a sculpture representing the Fairchild Challenge, Fairchild’s multidisciplinary environmental education outreach program structured specifically for adolescents.*



The piece was part of “Celebrating America’s Public Gardens,” an exhibit that was held in the shadow of the Capitol building’s dome, at the United States Botanic Garden in Washington, D.C. It ran from May 26 through October 8, 2007. The broad exhibit celebrated the work and the impact of botanic gardens across America in the segment titled “A Sense of Place,” where twelve gardens dazzled with the beauty of their diverse displays. In the “Green Today, Growing Tomorrows,” where the Challenge sculpture was located, eight gardens offered glittering representations of their educational programs.



Fittingly, everything about the Challenge sculpture glowed with teen energy and spirit. Florida artist Sande Keil captured the lily on the second night of its bloom, when its white petals turn to pink – symbolic of transformative experiences of secondary school students all over the world participating in Fairchild Challenge activities. Teens everywhere seek higher meaning, rebel against accepted wisdom and have boundless imagination and creativity to contribute.

Miami artist Sande Keil with the sculpture she created for the Fairchild Challenge.

Even the sculpture’s primary material, bamboo—chosen for its versatility, strength and flexibility—is reflective of the transformation of teen participants in the Fairchild Challenge. Ms. Keil created the piece using some 800 lengths of different varieties of bamboo and incorporated textile dyes and copper mesh. The words burnished into the bamboo represent the ways in which teens’ restless energies are channeled and encouraged: compose, explore, build, inspire and motivate. In a mysterious, complex process familiar to artists and parents everywhere, the natural materials were polished to a shine, shielded with coats of protective varnish, cajoled into place and refined and adjusted and, over time, lovingly pieced together to reveal a nature both unique and resplendent.

The Challenge is only one of Fairchild’s programs tailoring botanical and environmental education to the needs of audiences from pre-school through retirement. Crafted specifically to entice teens to rely on studies in and across various disciplines while appealing to their natural sense of curiosity, the Challenge engaged more than 25,000 middle and high school students in 91 South Florida schools last year, setting a new record. 