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Riley creates profusion of color

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*By Jamie Duffy
MadisonChatham This Week*

Beth Riley of Madison will never forget leaving the Morristown Memorial Hospital 13 years ago.

"I was discharged, but we didn't have any babies."

Her twins, Connor and Abigail, were struggling for their lives in the neonatal intensive care unit, or NICU, while a team of professionals did everything they could to keep them alive.

Abigail stayed for a mere 12 days; Connor spent four months going through multiple operations.

To say Riley and her husband, Dave, are grateful for NICU would be an understatement. The family, which includes the Rileys' older child, 15-year-old Meghan, never misses the annual NICU picnic.

Now, Riley will thank the hospital and its staff in another way by bringing her professional capabilities as a garden designer to Mansion in May, a benefit for the hospital at Fawn Hill Farm on Spring Valley Road in Harding Township. Riley is one of 17 landscape designers donating work to the designer show house, which is open for the 31 days of May.

Her 60-by-10-foot crescent-shaped plot by the carriage house will feature native plants, a favorite of Riley's, who grew up in a gardening family in Morris Plains.

"Dad was roses and vegetables. Mom was in charge of perennials, annuals and containers," Riley said of her parents, Henry and Joyce Parsons. At one time, Granpa Parsons had a working farm in Washington Valley.

From an early age, Riley, a Morristown High School graduate, and her sister, Linda Darwin of Washington, were given their own gardens to tend.

Riley, earned a business degree at University of Shippensburg and an MBA from Fairleigh Dickinson University. She went on to a career as a marketing executive at Bell Labs and subsequently at Verizon, but she continued her horticultural interests all the while.

"On the weekends, I'd be down at the New York Botanical Gardens taking courses or at Rutgers," she said. Some of the Rutgers courses included bud and bark identification, designing with perennials and new plant introductions.

When her Bell job ended in 2002, Riley took off a summer and started her own business, the Potted Garden. She works with private and commercial clients matching what they need with her enthusiasm for all things green.

She began as a volunteer at the Frelinghuysen Arboretum in Morris Township. Five years ago, she joined the horticultural staff. A part-time aide, she works on the seasonal gardens.

"I've designed all the annual gardens," she said.

A member of the Garden Club of Madison, Riley designs the annual containerized gardens for



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Beth Riley

the reflecting pool terrace at the Madison Public Library and has set up a design for the Mead Hall lawn at Drew University.

Four years ago, she was invited to create a small garden at the Museum of Early Trades & Crafts in Madison, another assignment she donated.

"They wanted it to be a Victorian-era garden that was low-maintenance and that the deer didn't eat."

No critter evidently is scared off by the griffin, plucked from the top of the James Building across the street. The griffin, the original of a replica restored to the top of the building, sits in the garden's center.

For the walled garden at Mansion in May, Riley is planting numerous shrubs, ferns and flowers that will bloom as thousands of visitors make their way through house and garden.

Against the stone wall there is climbing — and blooming — hydrangea Riley brought back to health. Around the base of a mature pine tree, there will be plenty of ferns, the names themselves entertaining: shaggy shield, male robust, ostrich, Korean rock and Dixie wood. Spring blooms will include lilacs, viburnum, iris, bluestar, false indigo, a new "interesting" clematis groundcover and the itoh peony, "a beautiful hybrid," according to Riley.

"I was thrilled to be involved," even before she was chosen, she said, just to "come and look at the spaces."

And what about Connor and Abigail? Eighth-graders at Madison Junior School, they are doing fine.

"Connor is a thriving runner and student," Riley says. "Although he doesn't actually remember his NICU tenure, he has the "battle scars" to prove it and says "it's kind cool."

For more information see <http://www.mansioninmay.com>^[2] or <http://www.ThePottedGarden.biz>^[3].

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