

Bein' green

*Activist
fights to
keep state
park
beautiful*

JOSIE SYZMAN

She decided the answer was "no" and rallied a grassroots movement to prevent this type of commercial development at Liberty State Park. "She's determined, and so am I," Zapp said of her favorite statue.

"Zapp's leadership role in the community expands her intellect and brings her close to people all over the world. "I am always reading environmental studies, which improves my mind. I summarize the main points and try to stay organized. I have lots of carefully labeled boxes in my house, but I basically rely on the file cabinets of my mind," she said with a direct smile.

She has piercingly bright blue eyes, flowing hair and a casual air. "I do a lot of work to reach my goal, which is to make the park clean and safe for everyone. This used to be a big industrial area, so there was a great deal of contaminated material dumped here. My specialty is studying hazardous wastes. Liberty State Park is what's known as an 'orphan site,' which means no one was really responsible for it."

"I learned that not all dumping was dangerous. According to Zapp, 242 species of plants and flowers co-habitate in the park because, in the days when immigrants came here by the thousands, ships dumped ballast as they pulled into Ellis Island. The

ballast was full of seeds, which took root in the welcoming soil. "Plants are essential to absorb waste material," she added.

Zapp doesn't consider herself an expert. "I don't have all the answers, but if we bring knowledgeable people together to sit around the table, we'll make progress," she said.

She likes working with environmentalists because "they're thinking about others, about the future of the planet."

She finds being a senior an advantage in her work. "My favorite theme song is 'The Best is Yet to Come.' Memories are good, like an old bottle of wine you open now and then, but you must always have a new bottle to drink."

Zapp was a leader in a variety of impressive community successes: the "Save the Boulevard Committee," organized in 1969 to prevent construction of a federal highway along Kennedy Boulevard; the 1970 "Save the Courthouse Committee"; the 1970 Hudson County Citizens for Clean Air; appointment to the first N.J. Green Acre Bond Issue Committee in 1971; the 1976 movement to acquire Caven Point fishing pier as a natural wildlife habitat (in cooperation with the New Jersey Audubon society); and the 1991 "Save Liberty State Park Coalition" to protest proposed development of a golf course.

And just last month, she was one of the Hudson County citizens chosen to carry the Olympic torch on its his-

toric journey across the United States.

She and her husband, Warren, recently celebrated their 53rd wedding anniversary. (He is a historian interested in the Jersey City Fire Department.) Their son, Rennie, is a computer analyst in Colorado. They have two grandsons, Brian, 12, and Jackson Tyler, 14. Their late daughter, Calla, who died in a car accident at age 23, was also interested in the environment. "Afterwards, it seems their spirit lives on and you carry their torch for them," Zapp said softly as I admired a portrait of this young woman.

"It's great not to dry up!" she said. "There's so much to do at Liberty State Park. . . . Everyone can get involved; we need senior volunteers to work with us taking inventory of flowers, for example."

She thinks that seniors work well with all age groups. "It's important to bring your experience to the table when you work with younger people. As a senior, you know that mistakes can be overcome. You're not afraid to speak your mind, you don't have to weigh every word as long as you mean things in a good spirit. I say just be direct and encourage people to move on after a long discussion." That must be her formula for getting things accomplished, which I greatly admire.

"We've been through it all . . . the good times and the bad . . . so we seniors are mellow and don't take ourselves too seriously," she said as we relaxed under the magnificent trees.

Audrey Zapp has an "enchanted garden" in her back yard. It's her private retreat - the place where one of Jersey City's best-known community activists goes to meditate and regain her inner strength.

Zapp, 70, is a passionate fighter for the future of our natural habitat. "If we don't protect our environment, we'll take away the heritage of our descendants," she said on a stifling, humid June morning.

After a three-block walk on concrete, it was delightful to sit under a shady tree sipping cool fruit juices while Tiger, a handsome gray tabby, surveyed his domain in dignified silence.

"People have to have green space in order to survive. . . . Places like Liberty State Park are an oasis in our hot, crowded urban world," she said when I asked about her leadership role in support of this landmark park on the Jersey City waterfront.

Zapp, a 1942 graduate of Lincoln

High School in Jersey City and 1971 Jersey Journal Woman of Achievement, is a trustee of the Liberty State Park Conservancy. She's worked to develop the park as a public space for more than 25 years.

She visits the park nearly every day for her regular exercise on the mile-long walkway that offers a spectacular view of the Hudson River and New York City skyline.

The Statue of Liberty is not just a national monument in her eyes. "Everything I do for the park is because of her. For example, in 1981 a Hollywood developer wanted to build a private theme park and put up a monorail to the statue. I asked myself, 'Is this what she would want?'"