Alumni

The Guardian of Gotham's Gardens

New York City Commissioner for Parks and Recreation Adrian Benepe preserves and protects the 28,000 acres that offer residents a refuge from urban life.

By
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|
Fall 2002

On January 24, 2002, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg phoned Adrian Benepe ’81J and asked him to take charge of the largest and most complex urban parks system in the world.

Exactly 100 days after taking office, Benepe performs his job as New York City’s commissioner of parks and recreation with such savoir faire that it seems as if he’s spent his life preparing for it (and in many ways he has). Riding up to the Bronx to preside over the opening of the newly renovated Poe Park, Benepe inspects his territory along the way. “I can’t drive down any block without seeing something I’m responsible for,” he says. Using his cell phone as a two-way radio, he calls in reports to the department: the flower beds in the medians on Malcolm X Boulevard are filled with litter and the tree pits are overgrown with weeds. He reminds the person on the other end to make sure that the weeding doesn’t disturb the daffodils. Last year, as Manhattan borough commissioner for parks, Benepe helped conceive the Daffodil Project—for which city residents planted 1.5 million yellow daffodils across the city to serve as a perennial tribute to the victims of September 11.

Benepe, who reports to Deputy Mayor Patricia E. Harris, is now one of the city’s highest ranking officials, ultimately responsible for 28,000 acres of parkland, fourteen miles of beaches, all public pools, playgrounds, stadiums, and recreational facilities. He oversees the maintenance of historic houses, statues, monuments, and all plant and animal life in the parks. At its peak in the summer, the department employs about 10,000 people, and its annual budget exceeds $190 million, plus $150 million for capital projects. The event in Poe Park is just one of Benepe’s

endless obligations. Whether it’s appearing at the first opera of the summer season in Central Park, a press conference about the West Nile Virus, or the kickoff for the Readings in the Parks program, Benepe is the department’s most visible representative—giving remarks, offering support, answering questions, fostering partnerships. While such public engagements take up much of his time, he’s just as busy behind the scenes, hammering out short- and long-term goals and laying out plans for improvements to his vast domain.

Benepe is never without his cell phone, pager, and chain cutter—which he uses to clip down illegal advertising signs in the parks. On the ride back from Poe Park, he is again surveying his turf for things amiss. Nothing makes him cringe more than the sight of graffiti, which he says “isn’t—and never has been—art.” He says the decline of the parks in the seventies and eighties began with graffiti, broken bottles, and litter—and then escalated to crime far worse. “It’s a sign that no one is in control,” he says. There’s no place for it in the parks. We want our parks to be an oasis.”

Benepe says that his most ambitious goal is to provide everyone in his department with horticultural training—from entry-level workers to senior management. “The legacy I’m looking for is not grandiose,” he says. “It’s sort of a simple concept. I’d really like the parks to have a much better standard for horticulture and caring for growing things. Every parks worker should be a gardener in practice.”

Just last month Benepe got his hands dirty along with a group of parks employees at a seminar on planting techniques in Morningside Park, according to Douglas Robinson, former president and board member of the advocacy group Friends of Morningside Park. “Adrian hasn’t lost touch with the grassroots folks or grassroots issues,” says Robinson. “Some people rise to the top and forget, but he hasn’t forgotten.”

Robinson recalls an Earth Day celebration in Morningside Park when Benepe was still Manhattan borough commissioner. “We were waiting for the commissioner at the time, Henry Stern, to arrive, when suddenly Adrian takes off his walkie-talkie, climbs up a cliff in the back of the pond, and starts pulling out weeds and removing trash. It’s very hard to get up there, and the parks staff hadn’t done it, but instead of telling them to do it, he just did it.” Besides Benepe’s hands-on approach, Robinson says he’s impressed with the commissioner’s intimate knowledge of the various parks issues and his advocacy on behalf of all parks workers, many of whom he knows by name.

From the commissioner’s office on the third floor of the Central Park Arsenal, a historic ivy-covered brick building inside the park near 64th and Fifth, Benepe has an unusual New York City view. “I’m rarely at my desk,” he says, sitting on a sofa that faces two bird feeders outside the window.

His office is decorated with photos of his family and of him with various city officials. One print is displayed but not yet framed—Benepe and the Rolling Stones at a recent event in Van Cortland Park. “To me, they’re the greatest rock and roll band of all time,” he says.

This particular morning, however, Chopin plays softly in the background as Benepe assesses his schedule. From his computer comes a bubbling sound, a SpongeBob SquarePants screensaver. (SpongeBob is a Nickelodeon cartoon character and a favorite of Benepe’s eleven-year-old son, Erik. He also has a fifteen-year-old son, Alex.) Benepe’s secretary, Myra Sylman, hands him the latest issue of *New York* magazine opened to the “Scene” section, featuring a picture of him and his longtime friend and uptown neighbor, Ruth Westheimer, at a benefit for the Horticultural Society of New York. Benepe has become a familiar presence in the local media, just one indication of the affection New Yorkers have for the man they identify with one of their most treasured urban resources—green space.

As Benepe walks to the green SUV that will take him to his next appointment, he points out what he calls a “sparrow condominium” nesting in the ivy on one of the nearby zoo buildings. Driving through the back roads of Central Park, which he knows well from his days as a park ranger, he stares out the passenger window. “See how great the parks look? There’s nothing like rain to make the parks look beautiful.”

Benepe has what might be the most enviable job in the city administration—he spends much of his work day outside in the city’s most beautiful spaces. But while the areas he inherited are safer and more aesthetically pleasing than they have been in decades, what looms beneath the green surface for the department isn’t pretty: besides the million-dollar budget cuts, a federal lawsuit was filed last year claiming discrimination in hiring practices from 1994 to 1999—during Stern’s appointment. It will likely be years before the lawsuit is settled, but the budget cuts for parks in the current fiscal year have been set at about $12 million. Benepe, hailed by colleagues for his optimism, says he’ll find creative ways to make things better despite limited resources.

Benepe's connection to the parks department actually began when he was fifteen. His first job as a "parkie" was collecting trash in parks and mopping locker rooms at Szold Pool on the Lower East Side. He later got a job as a pushcart vendor in Central Park in the summer of 1976. "Every day I'd go to the garage and get this 600-pound cart, load it up with soup and loaves of bread, and push it from 81st to 59th Street and sell to lunch crowd. After that, I'd go up to Delacorte Theatre and sell to the dinner crowd." (The operation was illegal, he adds, since he didn't have a permit.)

Then, after college, he learned that the parks commissioner at the time, Gordon Davis, was starting a Park Ranger Program. Benepe left his internship at a weekly newspaper to join the first-ever class of park rangers. "For the first time in twenty or thirty years," he says, "people were enforcing the rules of the parks, giving directions, providing environmental education classes. Before [the ranger program], there was no way of enforcing rules and regulations in the parks. It was like the Wild West."

"This is hard for people to understand who haven't lived here very long or come to visit, but Central Park back then was a disaster. And if Central Park was a disaster, then the rest of the parks were even worse. The castle was a ruin. There was a burned-down restaurant at 110th Street. The dairy was a storage shed. The weeds were waist-high and all the monuments were covered with graffiti. It was so bad that every rowboat in Central Park was covered with graffiti so that they looked like floating subway cars. The Sheep Meadow was a dust bowl. So you really had to be an optimist to think that things would turn around."

After a year and a half as a park ranger, a job he loved, Benepe left for journalism school at Columbia. He was inspired by the pivotal role journalists had played during Watergate, after which he says "everybody thought the best thing to do to help society was to become a reporter."

When Benepe graduated from the Graduate School of Journalism in 1981, he received a Pulitzer fellowship, the highest honor awarded to a J-school graduate, which allowed him to work in Poland and Germany. When he returned to the United States, Benepe got a job at the *Hudson Dispatch*, but after working for six months as a reporter, he missed public service. "I thought to myself, 'Years from now I'll still be writing news stories.' I wanted to do more." Professor Emeritus of Journalism Melvin Mencher, who was impressed by Benepe's talent as a reporter and writer, expresses surprise that his former student works in city government. "I'm disappointed that he

didn’t go into journalism,” he says.

Benepe practically grew up on and around the University campus, which nurtured his affection for Columbia. “I’ve spent 43 of my 45 years on the Upper West Side,” he says. The list of Columbia degrees in his family reaches back generations. His grandfather, Antoni Wojcicki ’50TC, earned a doctorate at Teachers College and worked at the United Nations for thirty years. Benepe’s mother, Jagna W. Sharff, received her Ph.D. from Columbia in 1979, and his younger sister, Jennifer Benepe, graduated from the journalism school last May. His stepfather is filmmaker Stefan Sharff, a former head of Columbia’s film division. Benepe’s wife, Charlotte Glasser, whom he met in the cafeteria at Middlebury College, where they were both working while undergraduates, will soon be a Columbia student as well. After 24 years of teaching, Glasser begins work on her master’s degree at Columbia’s School of Social Work this fall.

Benepe’s career in public service, he says, can be attributed to the influence of both his parents. His father, Barry Benepe, a retired city planner, founded New York City’s Greenmarket system—made up of the outdoor food markets seen in parks and streets throughout the city. Benepe’s mother, who died last fall, was an urban anthropologist who combined her research with advocacy work for underprivileged children and families. “I combined the two—focusing on both the people and the place,” he says.

With those two equally important priorities in mind, Benepe approaches his challenges with confidence and enthusiasm. “We’ve got the best people of any city agency,” he says. “The parks are cleaner and safer now than they’ve been in four decades. You can’t close the parks, and the parks are not going to go away. Someone’s got to do the job, and it might as well be me.”

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