
October 26, 2003

LONG ISLAND JOURNAL; Tending to an Estate, but It's Not Your Own

By MARCELLE S. FISCHLER

FOR 23 years, sailboats bobbing in Manhasset Bay and the sweeping lawns of Sands Point beyond were the views Victor Marchese enjoyed from his hilltop cottage near the tip of the Great Neck peninsula. His gardens were extensive: more than seven acres of towering copper beeches and weeping willows, fragrant lilac bushes and nearly half an acre of tomatoes, Swiss chard and lettuces encircled by hydrangeas, snapdragons and dahlias. Bright yellow chrysanthemums blossomed in his greenhouse, along with an assortment of orchids.

Mr. Marchese, 54, still enjoys the vistas, but since he moved out of the cottage a few weeks ago, he sees them only during working hours. He is a caretaker, maintaining a world beyond his financial means. Instead of diving into the pool or strolling the private beach in front of it, he is making sure the chaises are properly lined up and the beach is tidy.

"I see this not only as a beautiful spot, I see it as things that have to be done," Mr. Marchese said. "It's a place of employment." If things break, he fixes them or calls in the plumber, electrician or contractor. He refinishes floors, repairs antiques and supervises three gardeners who take care of the lawns, gardens and greenhouse on the estate and an adjoining 14-acre property. The greenhouse supplies flowers for the 15-room mansion.

Mathilde Krim, his employer, a former science researcher who relishes the outdoors, said that Mr. Marchese's work reflected a tasteful artistic sensibility and that he kept her property in shape.

"A caretaker is essential in a large place," Dr. Krim said.

Mr. Marchese said his was an around-the-clock job that included security and being available whenever his boss was home.

Mr. Marchese studied horticulture and at 21, he became chief groundskeeper at the 50-acre Muttontown estate, which later became the Chelsea Center.

For his Great Neck job, Mr. Marchese installed the greenhouse, designed the gardens and built a grape arbor. When Dr. Krim recently asked him to repair a set of wood nesting tables, he buffed the wood and replaced every screw with old ones that matched. He also sat on a town waterfront advisory committee for six years.

But Mr. Marchese realized that as a Gold Coast caretaker, he was part of a dying breed.

"This profession is finishing," Mr. Marchese said. "These estates are finishing."

With Dr. Krim's encouragement, Mr. Marchese went back to school, earning a bachelor's degree, then a master's in clinical social work. He continued to be a caretaker but opened a private practice in Manhasset, working with adolescents and adults on issues like substance abuse and body image. Now his life is changing even more.

A few weeks ago, Mr. Marchese moved to his own home in Glen Cove and is commuting to the estate.

"I am very grateful to her and loyal to her and will continue help her run this place until my services are no longer needed," Mr. Marchese said.

As for his new home, he said: "My house is literally 4 feet away from my neighbors with a standard backyard that's like 50 feet. I have gone from 50 acres to 7 acres to a 50-by-130 lot."

Ron Haugen likes to barter. He once got a massage in exchange for fixing a garage door. He resealed his dentist's driveway and cleaned his deck in exchange for a crown. So when he needed a place to live, Mr. Haugen, 54, took out an ad in The Oyster Bay Enterprise Guardian for a job as a caretaker/handyman: "Willing to provide maintenance services in exchange for small apartment and reduced rent. North Shore preferred."

That is how he landed a job three years ago taking care of a 20-acre estate on Centre Island. In lieu of rent on his two-bedroom apartment over the garage, Mr. Haugen takes care of the estate, oversees the adjoining three-acre property and then goes to work as a handyman for his other clients.

"There are stewards and there are property owners," Mr. Haugen said. "I've chosen the path of being a property steward."

Mr. Haugen loves to sit on his small porch, admiring the trees and the glistening waters of Oyster Bay in the distance.

"I've always liked nature," said Mr. Haugen, who years ago put "living in a park" on his wish list.

But the upkeep is constant, Mr. Haugen said, including maintaining the well and checking the furnaces at both estates.

Hunt Lawrence, a private investor, spends weekends on the neighboring estate. It is one of three houses Mr. Lawrence owns besides his Manhattan residence. He said Mr. Haugen's job was a vital part of the equation. "You just can't keep these houses and have New York be your main residence without having someone help you take care of the house," Mr. Lawrence said.

When it's beyond his expertise, Mr. Haugen calls in a contractor.

"I can relate to all the problems that people have had getting things done," Mr. Haugen said.

When one of the towering old trees on the estate fell over and blocked the driveway, Mr. Haugen took out the chain saw. But to supply the fireplace in the main house, he orders cords of firewood.

"Do I look like Paul Bunyan?" he said.

As the owner of Exclusive Estate Service and Yacht Detailing, Katy Hine, 32, of Hampton Bays is a roving caretaker and housewatcher. She oversees 10 properties from Westhampton to Water Mill. On Mondays, after her clients leave for their primary residences, Ms. Hine checks to see if the doors and windows are locked and whether they have left a note listing problems that need to be fixed.

Ms. Hine slid into her work when she got a job parking cars on a nine-acre oceanfront estate in Southampton after graduating from Southampton College in 1994.

"It ended up morphing into a six-year stint," Ms. Hine said.

She washed cars, weeded the garden, arranged for ice cream carts on the beach, increasingly taking on more responsibilities as part of a staff that also included nannies and housekeepers. When the estate manager quit suddenly, she was asked to take over, often working from 8 a.m. to 1 a.m. She learned when she needed to whisper, tiptoe or take the back stairs.

Three years ago, Ms. Hine started her own caretaking company, catering mostly to two- and three-acre properties on an as-needed basis. Beyond repairs she can do herself, Ms. Hine has a list of service providers that includes orchid distributors, chefs, bartenders and helicopter pilots for getting clients on and off the Island quickly.

"Clients will even call me for medical emergencies," Ms. Hine said.

Ms. Hine said she thought it was easier for a caretaker than a homeowner to get things done.

"I act as a liaison between the client and the service," Ms. Hine said. "It's a wonderful thing to call up the plumber at 10 o'clock on Sunday night and say, 'Hi, this is Katy, I need a favor.'"

Before they moved to East Hampton full time three years ago, John Thorsen came out weekends from the city with his wife, Julie, and son, Miles. When they left, they set the thermostat back to 50, turned off the hot-water heater and switched off the front porch light. The following weekend, the house took hours to warm up again.

"There was always a moment of anxiety as I would round the corner before our house came into view," Mr. Thorsen said. Had a pipe burst? Did the low temperature monitoring device work?

Realizing that many second homeowners shared his concern, Mr. Thorsen, 46, set out to engineer a solution. This summer he started Connected Hearth, a home automation system that can be accessed over the Internet.

Lights can be turned off and on, appliances adjusted, leaks detected, Jacuzzi warmed up and the security system controlled. The front light can be switched on via cellphone.

"Our intent is not to replace caretakers but to supplement them," Mr. Thorsen said.

"It can't do things like take the mail out of the mailbox or collect the newspapers off the driveway," Mr. Thorsen said, "but it can let you pan a camera across your living room."

E-mail: lijournal@nytimes.com