

# Demi's Secret Garden

By Rachelle Q. Ayuyang



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**Biblical Theme:** Most of Bracerios' sculptures are inspired by the bible. This one is a carving of Jesus Christ.

At 7 a.m. when most San Francisco Bay Area residents are just rising and preparing to go to work, Demetrio Bracerios is already getting his hands dirty. The employee of the San Francisco Department of Recreation and Parks is clearing out tall dead stalks among the plants in front of Cayuga Playground, the once forsaken park on the edge of town. The five-foot-tall Bracerios, a San Franciscan with lots of vision, is solely responsible for transforming it into an urban oasis.

Dressed in a pair of Levi's, Nike jacket and an oversized cap with "San Francisco Rec & Park Director" stitched across it, he is clearly surprised but also heartened by a journalist's visit. It's a chance for him to talk about his labor of love.

Praises *Chronicle* columnist Scott Ostler: "The park is the damndest (sic) thing I've seen in this city. I love the Golden Gate Bridge and the cable cars and also the hidden treasures, but from now on, when I show friends and relatives around San Francisco, my first stop will be Demi's park."

Getting to Cayuga Playground is a bit of a walk on the wild side. Its garbage-strewn border on Alemany Boulevard gives off a funky smell of human and household wastes, and the sounds from a radio spew from the open door of a beat-up RV. But once past all that and two houses farther, makeshift stairs cutting through the side of a house leads to Cayuga and Naglee Streets, where the park is located.

There's a recreation center, tennis and basketball courts and customary swings and slides. Beyond the concrete part of the playground, however, one steps into a lush environment. The grass underfoot is wet and soft, and everything is so green. The air smells clean and fresh. A batter's cage is in one corner, although playing ball may prove difficult with flowering plants in the middle of the field.

Cypress trees grow on the park's gentle slope, their branches like fingers touching the sky. The park competes with the elevated BART tracks going to and from San Francisco. It's also bordered by a supporting wall of Interstate 280, where vehicles either speed or crawl through traffic.

Be that as it may, the park is a spiritual





**Landscape Artist: Demi Braceros is the sole caretaker of Cayuga Playground, which he transformed into an urban oasis after years of neglect.**

sanctuary, reflective of its caretaker who at 60 is a man at peace. "We have to do *something* before we die," he emphasizes. "My dream has been fulfilled."

Braceros was born in Cabugao, Ilocos Sur in 1940. He earned a bachelor's of science degree in industrial education and became an elementary schoolteacher in industrial arts in the Philippines. In 1973, Braceros came to the United States, following his Pangasinan native wife, Esperanza, who was also a teacher.

They settled in San Francisco, where he landed a job in a law firm. After a few years, however, he wanted to work in the city's parks. In 1977, the San Francisco Department of Recreation and Parks assigned him to the Arboretum in Golden Gate Park. Later, he was on a reforestation project for three years.

In 1986, he was assigned to Cayuga Playground. Braceros poured his whole heart and soul into the park. He did repairs, minor construction and the landscaping virtually all by himself. One nice touch is the archways that he formed by intertwining branches and vines for the simple paths leading into a grove of trees.

Braceros hopes to instill in visitors the park's spirituality. Biblical themes abound. On his newest trail, he says, "It's the complete story of the Garden of Eden, where the first humans committed sin. I thought of naming it such because I want to bring out how we should behave. We should be aware that we shouldn't commit sin again."

Braceros has left landmarks, which he carved from wood, along the trails. He has placed such ornaments as the "Tree of Knowledge" and the "Burning Bush" among the shrubs. By the end of this trail, a stump with another biblical reference moves Braceros to say, "When you are happy, you should blow the trumpet of God. Look at what we did here and express your feelings about the gardens."

As the various folk art that inhabit his trails and gardens show, Braceros is certainly an artist. Braceros points to one of his creations - an intricately detailed alligator along the walking path of the "Garden of Eden Trail." He carved the fallen log on the spot because it was too heavy to carry.

A rainstorm had apparently knocked down some trees, during the park's renovation. Rather than throwing the wood and kindling away, Braceros used his expertise in "shop" to create park benches, animals and sculptures of popular figures. Among them are golf star Tiger Woods, tennis phenom Serena Williams, San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown and the late *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Herb Caen.

On the "New Hope Trail," he stops in front of a small statue, stroking it and murmuring several times. Braceros asks, "Do you know who that is?" It is the late Princess Diana. One day, he was compelled to do a carving of her. A week after he finished it, Diana died in Paris.

His tool shed reveals among his various gardening paraphernalia more artistic ren-

derings, which include Martin Luther King, Jr. and one-time San Francisco Mayor now U.S. Senator Diane Feinstein.

Despite Braceros' Herculean efforts to uplift people's spirits and actions, they aren't always returned in kind. A rash of thefts have beset the park. More than 350 flowers were stolen and sold for profit to such vendors as the Flower Mart in the city's South of Market district. This morning, his boss, Kitty, has come to see if there were more flowers taken from the park. Braceros sadly tells her he noticed that some were missing.

The thefts weren't the only disturbances at the playground. Braceros himself suffered a heart attack last year and underwent quadruple-bypass surgery. According to Kitty, the park fell into disarray during his four-month sabbatical, despite some neighbors' efforts to maintain it. She no longer includes him with the regular crew in charge of the city parks' maintenance. "We want to keep him here," Kitty says, with a twinkle in her eye.

And Cayuga Playground is where Braceros will stay. He believes there's still much to do, particularly the side bordering a private parking lot.

Cayuga Playground was declared the most beautiful park in the city by state Assemblywoman Carole Migden and honored by the California Recreation and Parks Society. Braceros says a class from San Francisco State University even came here to do a report because, the instructor claims, the park's wood carvings are the best examples of Asian art in the city.

A tour of the playground doesn't take very long. But the park coaxes city dwellers to take a time-out from the grindstone and breathe and to simply appreciate the rare sculpted surroundings.

It's almost 8:30 a.m., and the early morning has given way to a pinkish sky. Braceros approaches a pint-size totem pole. He says he carved it at the request of a neighborhood youth, whose brother had committed suicide. "I hope we can touch them," Braceros says of the younger generation, "and they will learn from what we are doing. The behavior of people changes when they come here." After being in Braceros' company, you believe for a moment that it's true. ■

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