Honoring Champions of the Park

Johnny & Indhira Arias for the Parade Ground

Bash & Meruet Dibra for Canine Court

Marvin Shandler & Linda Shandler Friedman for Allen Shandler Recreation Area
Dear Friends:

This year’s UN-Gala is our environmentally conscious approach to the annual gala. No funds were spent on catering, decorations, or a venue. Instead, more contributions directly supported our Urban Eco-Teens. It was the most ecologically sound UN-event possible— it’s an UN-Gala!

We were proud to honor three exceptional pairs of individuals who, each in their own way, champion Van Cortlandt Park: Johnny and Indhira Arias for the Parade Ground; Bash and Meruet Dibra for Canine Court; and Marvin Shandler and Linda Shandler Friedman for the Allen Shandler Recreation Area.

Van Cortlandt Park Conservancy’s Urban Ecology Teen Internship introduces Bronx high school students to studies and careers in natural resources. This year we brought in a professional evaluator to help us refine our program. Abby Remer of the Youth Development Institute came to us through The Pinkerton Foundation’s Career Internship Network. Abby and our Director of Youth & Volunteer Programs streamlined the program goals and activities to strengthen core programming and leadership training.

This was the first summer that four interns returned to the program for a third year. Two interns (college students) became Crew Leaders and the other two (high school seniors) were beneficiaries of an innovative new program component: a video project. This project was done under the guidance of Magic Box Productions. The result is a dynamic 10-minute video that clearly illustrates the many different components of Urban Ecology Teen Internship. You can see it on our website: www.vcpark.org.

Capoeira in the Park returned this year as part of our unique free cultural programming. ABADÁ-Capoeira Bronx performed and taught this exciting Afro-Brazilian art form. Barefoot Dancing, our partnership with Lotus Music & Dance was held on Thursday evenings on the lawn east of Memorial Grove. Hundreds of community members came to dance in the park.

We added a new series entitled Family Fun @ 261 Street on Wednesdays for children ages 7 through 12. This was the first round of programs for this part of the park.

Our Fall Calendar, including a full listing of events in Van Cortlandt Park, is available in the park and online at www.vcpark.org.

We are grateful to our honorees and board members for their dedication to Van Cortlandt Park Conservancy. We hope that you will continue to visit Van Cortlandt Park and see us at work.

Sincerely,

Anthony Perez Cassino Margot Perron
Chair President

Thomas M. Kelly, PhD
Head of School
Horace Mann School
231 West 246 Street
Bronx, NY 10471
June 14, 2018

To the Van Cortlandt Park Conservancy, its Supporters and Benefactors:

Congratulations on this year’s eco-conscious annual fundraiser, the “UN-Gala!”

This so-called “non-event” is truly eventful and positively impactful on our beloved mother earth by reducing the conservancy’s carbon footprint. It will also enable direct use of contributions to support programming for the Bronx Urban Ecology Teen Internship where enterprising “Eco-Teens” learn about natural resource management and cultivate career skills in environmental science.

I commend this year’s dedicated and deserving three pairs of “UN-Gala” Honorees: Indhira and Johnny Arias, for the Parade Ground, substantiating the importance of baseball in the Van Cortlandt Park community; Marvin Shandler and Linda Shandler Friedman, for Allen Shandler Recreation Area, and who have created the Shandler Fund supporting the Urban Eco-Teens’ work in Van Cortlandt Park; Bash and Meruet Dibra for Canine Court, the very first dog playground and an exemplary canine oasis in our pet-loving city.

On behalf of NYC Parks, I want to extend my gratitude and appreciation for all the tender loving care the Van Cortlandt Park Conservancy provides to the park as a wonderfully recreational, educational and inspirational destination.

With every best wish for continued success in the bright green future.

Sincerely,

Mitchell J. Silver, FAICP, Hon. ASLA
Riverdale
Mind • Character • Community

Making memories in Van Cortlandt Park

David Kenas Photography

Lower School: 1 Spaulding Lane, Bronx, NY 10471
Middle & Upper School: 5250 Fieldston Road, Bronx, NY 10471
Web: www.riverdale.edu | Facebook: @riverdalecountryschool
Twitter: @RiverdaleCS | Instagram: @riverdalecs

Van Cortlandt Park Conservancy Gala Journal
Letter from Commissioner Iris Rodriguez-Rosa

To Van Cortlandt Park Conservancy and its Supporters:

I would like to extend my most heartfelt congratulations to the staff and board of Van Cortlandt Park Conservancy on this year’s environmentally conscious UN-Gala. The message in this non-event—saving our valuable natural resources—is worth highlighting. It makes us all stop and think.

Another advantage of an UN-Gala is that more of the funds raised will benefit the Bronx high school students who work and study in our Urban Ecology Teen Internship program. These young people are the future of our parks.

I am pleased to have this opportunity to honor the three Champions of Van Cortlandt Park: Johnny and Indira Arna for the Parade Ground; Bash and Menhet Dheira for Canine Court; and Marvin Shandler & Linda Shandler Friedman for the Allen Shandler Recreation Area.

Thank you for your support of The Conservancy’s programs and your ongoing commitment to making Van Cortlandt Park a vibrant destination for people of all ages.

Best Regards,

Iris Rodriguez-Rosa
Bronx Borough Commissioner
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Congratulations

Johnny & Indhira Arias
Bash & Meruet Dibra
Marvin Shandler & Linda Shandler Friedman

and

Van Cortlandt Park Conservancy

with gratitude for all you do
to keep us green.

Jonathan and Susan Bram
August 7, 2018

Dear Friends:

It is truly an honor to extend my warmest greetings and thanks to each of you for supporting the Van Cortlandt Park Conservancy’s “Un-Gala.” The uniqueness of this event deserves to be celebrated because it demands less of the environment and helps reduce our carbon footprint.

Since its inception in 2009, the Van Cortlandt Park Conservancy has served The Bronx by providing recreational and educational experiences to the community through its many hiking trails, playgrounds, scenic lakefront, and many other amenities including the ever popular Nature Center. The conservancy works tirelessly to protect this natural treasure that offers a unique escape from the busy streets of the city for some 2.5 million guests annually.

I would like to extend a special congratulations to the honorees: Johnny & Indhira Arias, for the Parade Ground; Bash & Meruet Dibra for Canine Court; and Marvin Shandler & Linda Shandler Friedman for Allen Shandler Recreation Area.

I applaud everyone for supporting the Van Cortlandt Park Conservancy by deciding to “skip the party,” and be part of this year’s UN-Gala. I look forward to many more years of this organization’s selfless efforts for our community.

Sincerely,

Senator Jeff Klein

The Senate State of New York
Deputy Democratic Conference Leader 34th District

JDKLEIN@NYSENATE.GOV

1250 WATKINS PLACE, SUITE 1203
Bronx, New York 10461
FAX (718) 822-2321

Congratulations
Johnny Arias
May your smile and spirit always light up Van Cortlandt Park.

Warmly,
Tracy & Eric Semler

Van Cortlandt Park Conservancy in honoring Champions of the Park

Johnny & Indhira Arias
Bash & Meruet Dibra
and
Marvin Shandler & Linda Shandler Friedman

Brennan O’Donnell, President
Manhattan College | Riverdale, NY | manhattan.edu
June 2018

Dear Van Cortlandt Park Conservancy:

Congratulations as you celebrate your special UN-Gala this year!

Your decision to host a virtual event is truly inspiring and sends a vital message about how important it is for us to always be cognizant of our impact on the environment and to continue doing our part to help protect Mother Nature.

My thanks to all of you for the critically important work that you are doing on behalf of Van Cortlandt Park and its many visitors, especially through unique and valuable programming like Urban Eco-Teens. Your love for and commitment to the park have helped make it one of our city’s greatest natural treasures, and we’re deeply grateful for all of your efforts.

Congratulations as well to this year’s honorees.

I look forward to working with all of you in the months and years ahead!

Sincerely,

COREY JOHNSON
Speaker
Dear Friends:

It is always a privilege to work closely with the Van Cortlandt Park Conservancy and to send my congratulations on this year’s ‘Un-Gala’ Celebration. I applaud the organization’s efforts to reduce their carbon footprint while working diligently to raise funds for Van Cortlandt Park Conservancy’s year-long Urban Ecology Teen Internship (Urban Eco-Teens).

It is also my pleasure to congratulate this year’s honorees, Johnny & Indhira Arias, Bash & Meruet Dibra, as well as Marvin Shandler & Linda Shandler Friedman. Throughout their decades of leadership, their vision and inspiration have helped to provide high caliber programming, new and improved recreational spaces, and quality resources for thousands of children and their families living in the North West Bronx. We are immensely thankful for their unwavering dedication and continued advocacy for Van Cortlandt Park.

Once again, thank you to the honorees, the Van Cortlandt Park Board of Directors and steering committee for this event for their leadership and dedication to the community. My best wishes for a successful Un-Gala!

Sincerely,

Hon. Andrew Cohen
New York City Council Member, District 11
Indhira & Johnny Arias
for the Parade Ground

To Indhira and Johnny Arias, baseball means community. It all started in the Dominican Republic (DR) when Johnny was 8 years old and fell in love with the game. He was discovered by a dedicated coach and eventually played for the DR professional league, Tetelo Vargas. He came to the U.S. to play for the Cincinnati Reds farm system and then to NYC to coach. Here he met and married Indhira – they lived on the same street in Manhattan.

They moved across the street from Van Cortlandt Park and started the M&J league, named after their boys Matthew and Johnny Jr. Then they realized that Van Cortlandt Park was the only major park without its own baseball league—so, they renamed their league Van Cortlandt Baseball League (VCBL).

Indhira keeps this nonprofit organization humming. She runs the office, tracking numbers and submitting grant reports. She makes sure everyone is well hydrated on hot days and participants feel welcome.

Annually, they teach over 500 young players discipline, techniques, teamwork, and caring for their park—players are taught how to clean and groom the Parade Ground fields. The league’s mission is to create sound athletes and mold them into ballplayers with strong fundamentals.

VCBL’s community grows each year. Not only do they travel to other U.S. states to compete nationally, they go to the Dominican Republic—exposing these young ballplayers to new opportunities and places. At home games, the kids learn to take their turn hosting travelling teams.

An important goal for the league is to develop young talent. VCBL holds showcases with major league scouts and college recruiters. Annually, 10% of their players go on to the major leagues. The Arias’ commitment has gained attention from many influential MLB players, namely Alex Rodriguez, Mariano Rivera, and Robinson Cano, who visited VCBL on opening days.

Johnny often shares, “Our personal goal is to provide a place where everyone can feel safe and build on their dreams.” Just give the Arias’ groomed clay, green grass, and kids eager to swing a bat to make that dream come true.

Johnny Arias has been an active and dedicated member of the Van Cortlandt Park Conservancy Board of Directors for many years.
Bash & Meruet Dibra
For Canine Court

Bash Dibra discovered his extraordinary ability to communicate with animals as a small child. While he was held in a Yugoslavian prison camp, after escaping from communist Albania, Bash befriended vicious guard dogs, observing their canine signals and developing remarkable insight into their feelings and intentions. Years later, Bash took on the unique task of training a young timber wolf for a film. This led Bash to a new understanding of canine thought processes and the development of his revolutionary training technique.

Bash is the internationally acclaimed animal behaviorist, trainer, and author many of whose clients are known worldwide. He is a recipient of a New York State Humane Association Award and a New York City Veterinary Medical Association Unsung Hero Award. Master groomer, Meruet, is not only a skilled licensed veterinary technician, but also has an innate gift for understanding and meeting each pet’s specific needs.

Bash Dibra and his sister Meruet Dibra, co-owners of Fieldston Pets, are masters in the care and management of animals. They live in Riverdale, New York and are dedicated supporters and promoters of Van Cortlandt Park.

Canine Court, in Van Cortlandt Park, is a living symbol of Fieldston Pets belief in giving back to the community. America’s very first dog playground, Canine Court is a green oasis of pastoral pet pastimes that includes an agility course and a custom people/pet water fountain. Safely fenced in within Van Cortlandt Park’s rolling fields and forests, Canine Court has been the go-to destination for recreation, socialization and pet-centric events and festivities.

Bash and Meruet encourage owners to play with their dogs rather than just watch them play with each other. After all, “When dogs give you unconditional love, why can’t you show unconditional love back?” Canine Court has become the jewel in the crown of dog playgrounds in every borough in New York City!
The history of the Shandler family dates back to 1944 when Frank and Sylvia Shandler opened their candy store on the corner of East 237th Street and Katonah Avenue. They were active in the community along with their three children: Marvin, Linda, and Allen.

When Allen began playing Little League, he became aware of the shortage of baseball fields in Van Cortlandt Park. A petition was drafted to use allocated funds to develop the woodland along Jerome Avenue, between East 233rd Street and Woodlawn Station, into an area which would include baseball fields and picnic tables. It was Allen who would sit for countless hours at a table outside of his Dad’s candy store to collect signatures on the petition. The purpose of the petition was to have the Woodlawn community demonstrate their need for the City to use the $300,000 allocated (but not implemented) funds to develop the wooded area that became Allen's park. Tragically, the realization of the development of the park came after Allen, at the age of 15, died of a brain tumor. In 1967 The City Council of New York dedicated this beautiful new park facility and renamed it “The Allen Shandler Recreation Area.”

The Allen Shandler Recreation Area in the North Bronx is not just a landmark - it also holds a sentimental spot in the hearts of many local residents, thanks to the committed contributions of the Shandler family of Woodlawn. For residents and other families who continue to enjoy this wonderful recreation area, Linda Shandler Friedman and Marvin Shandler have created the Shandler Fund which, through Van Cortlandt Park Conservancy, supports the Urban Eco-Teens work in Van Cortlandt Park.

“One can only wonder if the Shandler family is aware of how much they have touched this small community.”
- The Bronx Journal Online, October 2000
Riverdale Stables
The Riverdale Stables offers lessons 7 days per week starting at age 6. Set on 23 acres with 80 stalls, one indoor and four outdoor rings. The Riverdale Stables is the largest most diverse stables in the area. Beginner lessons, advanced lessons, boarding, leasing, therapeutic riding, jumping, dressage, horse show team, schooling shows, interscholastic programs, summer programs and after school - The Riverdale Stables has time in the saddle for all New Yorkers and is why we are: “Where New York City Learns to Ride!”
(718)548-4848 • www.RiverdaleStables.com

With affection for and gratitude to Margot Perron, for her years of excellent service to Van Cortlandt Park, the families who use it, and all the people of the Bronx.

Parke & Nina Spencer

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Van Cortlandt Park Conservancy is a tax exempt not-for-profit organization formed in partnership with NYC Parks. The Conservancy’s mission is to sustain and enhance the park as a vibrant destination for recreation, leisure, and the enjoyment of natural landscapes. The Conservancy’s programming in the arts and natural sciences is made possible by the generosity of the following supporters:


The maintenance of our famous 100 year-old **Cross Country Course** is funded by New York Road Runners, Collegiate School, Ethical Culture Fieldston School, Fordham University, Horace Mann School, Manhattan College, and New York City Athletic League.

Catholic High School Athletic Association, Commonwealth Cricket League, Ethical Culture Fieldston School, FSC Travel Soccer, Horace Mann School, The Ivy Preparatory School League, Manhattan Ultimate Disc League, Mexican-American Soccer League, NYC Athletic League, New York Cricket League, Randall’s Island Fields Group, Riverdale Country School, Riverdale Soccer Club, Van Cortlandt Baseball League, and Van Cortlandt Football Club and all lend support to The Conservancy to maintain the Parade Ground through the **Fields Fund**.

**Barefoot Dancing** was presented in partnership with **Lotus Music & Dance**. Funding was provided by Bronx Council on the Arts, CUNY Lehman College, The National Society of Colonial Dames in The State of New York, NYC Council Member Andrew Cohen, NYC Council Parks Equity Program, and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs. **Capoeira In The Park** was presented in partnership with ABADA-Capoeira Bronx (ACBX). Funding was provided through the NY City Council Cultural Immigrant Initiative.

The Hyde & Watson Foundation generously supports the purchase of office equipment for our administrative office and educational equipment our Urban Ecology Teen Internship program.

Guided **Birdwalks** are presented in partnership with New York City Audubon.

Fieldston Pets supports **Canine Court**.