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## Natural Selections: Tavis Dockwiler - Healing landscapes in a pandemic

May 4, 2020



Viridian designed the Schuylkill Center's River Trail Gateway entrance, completed in 2018.

Like so many small businesses, Roxborough's Tavis Dockwiler is struggling to keep her company moving forward and her people employed. A hugely talented landscape architect, she is the founder and principal of Viridian Landscape Studio, housed on Terrace Street not far

from the Spicy Belly restaurant (which she recommends). You've likely seen Viridian's work-- maybe the Schuylkill Center's still-new entrance on the Schuylkill River Trail, or the Philadelphia Zoo's children's zoo, among many others.

Her staff of five is all working from home these days, and she is grateful that Viridian received one of those now-coveted Paycheck Protection Program grants. "I did not have to furlough or lay anyone off, thankfully," she told me last week. "We're so lucky, and I really credit my office manager Daina Higgins for reading up on what was important about the loan. Michele Ferraro at Huntingdon Valley Bank has been our banker for 20 years, and what a difference she was. For small businesses, having a banker that works with you is great." She noted that Michele is a Roxborough resident too, saying, "this is all local people helping local people."

Like so many businesses, "we decided the week of March 13th that we needed to work from home. So we talked all that week-- what are we going to do and how are we going to do it? I worried about supporting everyone with technology, but realized everyone can just pick up their computers and take them home. So that Friday everyone was leaving the office with their computers and I was jokingly yelling 'stop thief!' after them," she laughed.

"But this has taken an emotional toll," she continued. "On March 16, a Monday, I got a call from the state saying they stopped all state contracts. I shuddered because that was 15 percent of our work. But a lot of it was work on boards, not yet in construction-- I wasn't sure they needed to stop design work. By Thursday they sorted themselves out and the work started again. Whew!" She also does a fair amount of university projects, which need board approval, and "I'm a little bit on tenterhooks about those. We have to see how they go. And construction is supposed to start up again on May 1, but I don't even know what that means.

"The architectural industry," she predicted, "will feel the effects of this for the next year-and-a-half, two years."

When does she think she will see her staff in person again? "I don't know" she confessed, "but I want to be careful with my staff. I value them as people and we need to make a team decision about when we go back to the office. I don't have a clear path forward. Maybe June? I'm trying to keep myself sane and don't want to be disappointed!"

Viridian, a name derived from the Latin word for green, was founded when Tavis and her now-retired partner, Rolf Sauer, started the firm in 1999, working out of Tavis' house back then. They met when Rolf hired Tavis to work for him at Andropogon Associates, the firm that pioneered ecological landscape design, coincidentally based only a half-mile away in Manayunk.

Viridian "was all set to have a 21st birthday party at the end of May, and then this happened," she told me and sighed. When I asked her to describe Viridian's work, she said Viridian "heals ecological systems while making beautiful places for people." In addition to several Schuylkill Center projects, her clients include Cook-Wissahickon School, Germantown Friends School, Bartram's Garden, the Overbrook Environmental Center, Penn Charter, La Salle University, and more.

She prides herself on the beauty and cost-effectiveness of their plans, but know they are also mitigating stormwater erosion, recharging groundwater, protecting species biodiversity, lowering energy costs, cooling the climate-- all of these critical things architects and landscape architects did not do enough of for far too long. But happily, Viridian and Andropogon are two of many firms in the region specializing in this work, and both are our neighbors in Roxborough-Manayunk.

Which is a frequent side note of this column: a surprising number of the greenest Philadelphians live and work in our corner of the city, and I love spotlighting them.

Back to Tavis: How is she staying sane in these uniquely complicated, perplexing times? "Gardening and Pictionary and puzzles," she offered, "plus bike riding with my son and daughter. Oh, and shouting across fences to my neighbors - I do see more people than I did before," and she laughed again, as so many of us are home and walking outside to find some sanity.

So if you read this column and see Tavis in Roxborough, please shout hello across her fence, and thank her and Viridian for their wonderful work healing ecological systems.

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