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Alumna's talent a Daley walk in the park [1]

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By **Vicki Hildner** | *CU Denver*

When Maggie Daley Park opens on the lakefront of Chicago in fall 2014, it will provide an opportunity for Juli Ordower, MLA, a graduate of the CU Denver College of Architecture and Planning [2]to showcase her talent and training.

The park will renovate more than 20 acres of North Grant Park (walking distance from the wildly popular Millennium Park) with a new world-class public landscape that is a destination in its own right. It's named after Maggie Daley, who served as the beloved first lady of Chicago for nearly a quarter century. Daley died in 2011 after a long battle with metastatic breast cancer.
As Maggie Daley Park nears completion, Ordower is busy coordinating the installation of more than 4,000 shrubs, 43,000 perennials and 283,000 square feet of sod in a park that is built on top of an underground parking garage.

She is quick to point out that the landscape she is installing is not her design. Ordower is executing the concepts of Michael van Valkenburgh, the highly regarded landscape architect whose projects can be seen in Boston, Miami Beach, New York, Dallas and many other cities.

She is responsible for making sure that construction of Maggie Daley Park follows his design drawings and specifications, right down to the last “Tulipa Maggie Daley,” a tulip named in Daley’s honor.

“I’m treating this like any other project, big or small, doing my best, following the plans,” Ordower said. “It’s fun to watch it develop.”

“I didn’t know it existed”



A native of Glencoe, Ill., Ordower started her post-graduate career not too far from the park she is working on now. She was a front-desk clerk at the Hilton Chicago Hotel. A classics major at Tufts University, she admits to graduating with “no idea” about what she would do next. She liked to ski, so she moved to Breckenridge where she again worked in a hotel. She had always liked flowers and architecture, so she had an open mind when a friend suggested she go back to school to study landscape architecture.
“I said, ‘Okay, but what’s that?’ I had never heard of [landscape architecture]. I didn’t know it existed,” Ordower said.

Not only did it exist, but she was living in a state where she could attend the Master of Landscape Architecture [3](MLA) program at CU Denver.

“She found her calling”

That was 1999, and to this day, Ordower sounds a little surprised and very grateful she was accepted into the program with an application portfolio that consisted of pictures she had taken on world travels.



Her first semester was a “roller coaster.” She had no architectural background, she didn’t know the terminology and she couldn’t draw.
“Everyone else in my class was an artist or had architectural training,” Ordower said. “It was very hard. I would call my parents and say, ‘I’m going to quit.’”

Ordower credits Lois Brink, her first studio professor, with keeping her in school. “She is a great teacher,” she said. “She kept you going even though you had no idea what you were doing.”

By the time she had finished the program, Ordower says she “had found her calling.”

“It’s a very good program”

After graduation, Ordower moved back to Chicago and joined Site Design Group, where she would spend the next decade working on public projects, including playgrounds, landscaping for new libraries and schools and streetscape work. She loved seeing projects move from design to reality. When the company downsized at the tail end of the recession, Ordower found herself on the freelance market, learning new skills and doing smaller projects.

“Finally, I decided, ‘I guess I will just have to go out on my own,’” she said. “I started my own business [4].”

Briar Patch Landscaping, a landscape contractor Ordower partners with, won the Maggie Daley Park contract, which led Ordower to her current mission—finding nearly 300,000 square feet of sod (she got it from one place) and thousands of shrubs and perennials (they came from 17 nurseries). When it’s finished, the park will include a three-acre play garden, a café, a rock-climbing park, a seasonal ice-skating pond nestled in an evergreen grove and comfortable gathering spaces for parents and caregivers.

The skills that Ordower has used to succeed in Chicago, with its long and distinguished history of wonderful architecture and landscape architecture, took root during her time in CU Denver's MLA program. "It's a very good program," she said. "I learned how to collaborate, to receive feedback and to give feedback. In the real world you are always working with architects, engineers and other landscape architects. I had good practice doing that."

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