

Chronogram

ARTS, CULTURE & SPIRIT

AMBER S. CLARK



41 **PAR FOR THE FARM:** The region's newest mini-golf course, Gnome on the Grange, at Kelder's Farm in Kerhonkson.

Gnome on the Grange

BY SHANNON GALLAGHER

PHOTOS BY AMBER S. CLARK



Twenty years ago, encouraged by boredom, Maria Reidelbach and Nina Garfinkel got in a car in Manhattan and headed north in search of a book topic. “We wanted something fun, and pop culture is just more fun than high culture,” Reidelbach asserts, laughing at her admission. Their quest ended at a mini-golf course in the Hudson Valley. Initial research taught the co-authors that the first mini-golf was built in 1928 on Lookout Mountain in Tennessee, by a woman named Frieda Carter. They also learned that the game was a raging pop culture fad in the 1930s. “It had this wonderful, intriguing, long history and nobody had written [a book] about it yet, so that was our subject,”

Reidelbach recalls. In 1987 their book, *Miniature Golf*, was published, the first book ever to be bound in AstroTurf.

Over the next several years Reidelbach continued to pursue her love of pop culture, writing the book *Completely MAD: A History of the Comic Book and Magazine*, and working on other community-oriented restoration art projects. In 2004 she began designing and building Goofy Garden Golf on Pier 25 in Manhattan’s Tribeca neighborhood. With the help of artist Ken Brown and local adults and children, Reidelbach turned the Pier 25 course into an eclectic garden furbished entirely with recyclables and trash found on sidewalks and in Dumpsters. The



(PREVIOUS PAGE) JOHN HUTCHINSON SCULPTING THE (SOON-TO-BE) WORLD'S LARGEST GARDEN GNOME.

(ABOVE) FARM OWNER CHRIS KELDER AND COURSE DESIGNER MARIA REIDELBACH.

(NEXT PAGE) WORKERS LANDSCAPING GNOME ON THE GRANGE.

course featured broken dish mosaics, detergent bottle flowers, a small windmill energy generator, and Chomsky, the world's largest garden gnome. An homage to Frieda Carter and the gnomes that decorated her course, Chomsky stands at almost 14 feet tall. First conceived as a topiary, Chomsky is made of wood and a wire frame, which is entirely covered in handcrafted plastic flowers. "We made him like a parade float," says Reidelbach.

When the pier was torn down by the city for rebuilding in 2005, Chomsky was sent to a barn in Accord for safekeeping. He is now being refurbished in cement so that he may be eligible for the *Guinness Book of World Records*. With the pier gone, Chomsky's new home will be in Kerhonkson at Gnome on the Grange, Reidelbach's latest mini-golf endeavor, which opened July 1.

It was nine years after the publication of *Miniature Golf* that Reidelbach says she developed the idea for a roadside attraction to celebrate local farming in a farming community. "Mini-golf really lends itself to 'theming,' because it's like a little world that you command, and you can make it express whatever fantasy you have," she explains. Sitting at a plastic picnic table outside a small Airstream trailer—her temporary home away from Tribeca—Reidelbach is taping together a map of the mini-golf course, the carpiece to her Palm Tree dangling from beneath her short, red streaked, salt-and-pepper hair. Five feet to her right the lush, green lawn ends abruptly, a makeshift wooden fence denoting the steep drop to the dirt road and a breathtaking expanse of green fields lined on the horizon by blue sky and the Catskills. "My mother's family were farmers [in Western Pennsylvania] and I love to eat fresh vegetables, and...because I know so much about miniature



golf, that's what I decided to start out with," she explains. Aware that she lacked the resources to buy her own property, and that a mini-golf course cannot generate enough money to cover the overhead of a big mortgage, Reidelbach began pitching her idea to farms throughout the Hudson Valley. "I was literally knocking on barn doors," she says with a laugh. Then, last summer, she visited Kelder's Farm, a visit that proved to be as fortuitous as her 1987 road trip.

Kelder's Farm includes a large farm stand, 100 acres of pick-your-own berries and pumpkins, a greenhouse, fresh flower gardens, and a petting zoo that is home to a donkey named Walter and goats purchased on eBay. "I'm in the entertainment business," Chris Kelder says earnestly, his toothy smile white against his dusty, sunburned face. A large part of Kelder's days are spent giving educational tours to various children's groups, teaching them about the Rondout Valley's agricultural heritage. As the vice president of the Rondout Valley Grower's Association, to which 44 farms belong, Kelder seeks to promote a sense of community by emphasizing the inherently local focus of farming. "The truth is, the Hudson Valley would still eat if there were no farms. But it's about promoting agriculture as a way of life. It's about community, the jobs it creates, preserving the working landscape and open space."

The constant rain of early June has left the dirt parking lot muddy. The 10 putting greens have been poured, clean cement islands surrounded by mud and clay. Naked, the holes are gently textured bowls, as though the cement was once water and someone opened a drain in the ground beneath them. The turf has been roughly laid over the first hole and a putter and ball lay by in the mud. As Reidelbach walks around the open space, cars on Route 209 cruising past just a few feet away, she gestures with her hands, pointing out where the woodlands and willow trees will be, and speaks excitedly about walking stick kale, which grows to be seven feet tall. In a low bed, she identifies cherry tomatoes and sweet potatoes, purple Brussels sprouts, and kohlrabi. The landscape was designed with the help of Lavonne Filipek; the bold and unusual colors, textures, and sizes were chosen to make the space lush, fragrant, and surprising, much like Willy Wonka's edible garden. Reidelbach snaps the petal off an orange flower to taste, then excitedly describes how at the final hole, the ball will disappear into a fake nest somewhere in the duck yard. To recycle, Reidelbach uses materials that were already on the farm, like sand and gravel. Leftover wood from a friend's house serves as material for custom benches. Plaques with botanical information, poetry, and recipes will serve to educate players about the landscape, as well as introduce new ideas about food. Most everything grown on the course is edible, and once it's all grown in, players will be encouraged to taste as they work their way through the garden. "I want to introduce people to stuff they hadn't thought about before. I want to make bridges over food," Reidelbach insists.

In addition to the farm theme and educational purpose of Reidelbach's mini-golf, her plan to sell locally made, rustic crafts as souvenirs, like Ellenville's historically significant nut bowls, is further complementary to Kelder's local thinking. It is this shared appreciation for the agricultural lifestyle, and the desire to make such a lifestyle accessible to everyone, that allowed Reidelbach and Kelder to forge a productive partnership. Though neither can tell how dynamics may change once the course is open, it is certain that Gnome on the Grange is indeed a farming roadside attraction in a farming community, and they've got the World's Largest Garden Gnome to prove it.

"The neat thing about mini-golf is that the very best mini-golf courses are built by some person who woke up one morning and they had this dream to build a mini-golf like the world has never seen before—that's sort of what happened to me." As she stands on muddy feet atop the first hole, smiles abounding beneath her straw fedora, Reidelbach's enthusiasm seems to color the afternoon and you can see it all.

Back at the farm stand, three generations of Kelder men stand around the counter. Eyebrows raised in playful provocation, the eldest, Wayne, turns to Reidelbach and, referencing the golf balls, asks, "You think people will buy those little white things?"

"Yeah, I do." She smiles, and heads toward the grange. ●

Gnome on the Grange is located on Kelder's Farm, 5575 Route 209 between Accord and Kerhonkson. (845) 626-7137; www.gnomeonthegrange.com. Open daily, 10am to dark.