

Dedicated teacher's legacy to grow each year



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As they gathered around the recently planted red oak tree, Tom Otte's former colleagues and students shared stories and paid respects, their moments of soft laughter interspersed with occasional tears.

They all agreed Blackberry Farm was one of Tom's favorite places. While Tom wasn't here in person on this day, he was still busy inspiring them in spirit — as he'll continue to do for generations.

Tom was a beloved figure at Rose E. Krug Elementary School, where he taught fifth grade from 1971 until his retirement in 2004. Last March, he passed away, but he'll forever be a presence for the thousands of students he mentored — and to thousands of future visitors at Blackberry Farm.

Tom's legacy has taken root and will grow every year. His caring colleagues arranged for a memorial dedication through the Fox Valley Park Foundation, which provides financial support for the Fox Valley Park District's mission to create better communities through conservation, preservation and youth enrichment recreation programs.

Planting a tree in honor or memory of a loved one is a meaningful tribute that leaves a lasting legacy for a \$500 donation. Opportunities also are available at \$1,000 for a park bench with a loved



Family members, friends and former colleagues gather for a dedication in honor of long-time teacher Tom Otte, who was memorialized at one of his favorite places, Blackberry Farm. | PHOTOS SUBMITTED BY THE FOX VALLEY PARK DISTRICT

“Trees are the best monuments that a man can erect to his own memory. They speak his praises without flattery, and they are blessings to children yet unborn.”

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one's name engraved.

Everybody is special in their own way, and these monuments are a testament to the impact they had — and still have — on people's lives.

Tom was the type of teacher who enhanced learning by involving his students in real life experiences. He originated the outdoor education program at Krug and routinely led his students on trips and tours to provide them with hands-on experiences.

Among his favorite outdoor classrooms was Blackberry Farm. He and his students didn't just visit here to view and write a report. They actually dressed as pioneers and lived life as they did in the 1800s, carrying

double buckets of water, churning butter and dipping candles in the Pioneer Cabin.

And, of course, no trip to Blackberry was complete for Tom without taking his students to the famous one-room schoolhouse for that day's lesson.

Tom's love for trees was heartwarming. Beyond the regular field trips to Blackberry, Red Oak Nature Center and the Morton Arboretum, Tom always made it a point to identify trees for his students during various excursion, be it a neighborhood visit or a walk in the park or a stroll across the school yard.

In the fall, each student made a leaf collection book to learn about trees. To this day,



former students say they still have the leaf collection they did in fifth grade.

Now his former students can add to it. Thanks to the dedicated tree — with his name emblazoned beneath it on a red quartz boulder — Tom will keep providing keepsakes for years. It's as

though he's still standing and teaching — and many will tell you that's indeed the case.

Jeff Long is the public relations manager for the Fox Valley Park District. For information on how you can leave a lasting legacy for a loved one through a tree or bench dedication, call 630-897-0516.

UPCOMING EVENTS

The Fox Valley Park District has scheduled the following programs this month:

■ Thursday, July 19: Free Concert in the Park — Jonathan Devin and New Country — at Montgomery Park, 7:30 to 9 p.m.

■ Friday, Saturday and Sunday, July 20-22: Summer Stage presents “Footloose” at the Paramount Theatre, 7 p.m. Friday, 2 and 7 p.m. Saturday, and 2 p.m. Sunday.

■ Saturday and Sunday, July 21-22: Model Train Extravaganza at Blackberry Farm, 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

■ Thursday, July 26: Free Concert in the Park — Aurora American Legion Band — at McCullough Park, 7:30 to 9 p.m.

■ Friday, July 27: Hoedown on the Farm at Blackberry Farm, 6 to 8 p.m.

■ Thursday, Aug. 2: Free Concert in the Park at McCullough Park, 7:30 to 9 p.m.

■ Saturday, Aug. 4: All-American Girl Birthday Celebration at Blackberry Farm, noon to 4 p.m. (free ice cream social from 1 to 2 p.m.)