

Hillcrest Nature Center

The Hillcrest Nature Center was established in 1997 as a combination memorial and educational garden. Bath resident and Hillcrest parent Susan Lines led, along with principal Fred Tomei, the effort to establish the garden. Donating services was Brown & Graves Lumber, R.B. Stout, Akron Tractor & Equipment, Jeff Knopp, Akron Plastics Industry, Goodyear, Richfield Safety Forces, North Hill Marble & Granite, along with countless other volunteers.

- **Matthew G. Smith Bench and Rock:** Was placed in 1997 as a memorial to Matthew G. Smith, a kindergartener who lost his battle with neuroblastoma on December 21, 1996.
- **Thornton Plaque:** Was placed in 2013 as a memorial to [Michelle "Shelly" Thornton](#), a student who lost her battle with neuroblastoma on February 20, 2013. She was a "[spirited, funny, and curious](#)" beautiful little girl.
- **9-11 Bench:** Was placed in 2001 to honor the victims of the 9-11 attacks. It was donated by the Richfield Safety Forces.

MORE THAN JUST A GARDEN The Beacon Journal Friday, June 27, 1997



One of the boulders in the new garden at Hillcrest Elementary School in Richfield. Parents, teachers, principal, pupils and friends of the school worked together to create the planting area that is also a tribute to the late Matthew Smith.

Memorial blooms

• Hillcrest School family in Revere district pulls together to create educational plot that is also tribute to 6-year-old who died of cancer

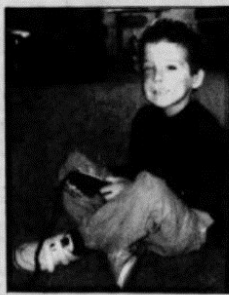
When we find ourselves looking into the faces of parents whose very world has been turned upside down by the death of a young child to something as sinister as cancer, there's always a search for the right words that will comfort and reach their pain.



Jewell Cardwell

Such is the case at Hillcrest Elementary School in the Revere School District, where parents, teachers, principal, pupils and friends of Hillcrest have moved both gravel and mud to show Matthew Smith's family how very much they do care.

Matthew G. Smith died last December of a rare form of cancer. The 6-year-old had been a kindergartener at Hillcrest Elementary School in Richfield. Matthew would have liked the new garden, his mother said.



Matthew was a kindergartener at Hillcrest School.

Matthew's parents, Paul and Liz Smith, and his soon-to-be-9-year-old brother and sister, twins Andy and Erin, are understandably touched beyond words at the outpouring of support for the project, which was saluted Sunday night during a dinner and lighting ceremony.

Bath resident and Hillcrest parent Susan Lines, who marshaled the effort, talked how the garden dream germinated into what it is today.

See CHILD, Page D1.

CHILD

• Boy's family helped build special garden

Continued from Page D1

"It started last fall when the principal (Frederick Tomei) wanted to improve a little outside corridor," Lines said.

"I think he was thinking of a butterfly bush or something to improve the site.

"Then Matthew passed away in December."

Lines said she had both in mind - her conversation with Tomei and little Matthew - when she was leafing through a new Burpee catalog "which talked about the resurgence of school gardens. . . . I figured if I could get resources and just have someone tell me what to do I could coordinate people to put together something.

"We sent out an interest survey in January and we had a terrific response from the people within the Hillcrest School community. We even found a landscape architect - Jeff Knopp - who was willing to design the garden even though it was his busy season. Jerry Kusar from R.B. Stout Inc. offered his services, too.

"And we had numerous wives to volunteer their husbands. Cyndi Palazzo volunteered her husband John to put in the irrigation system. Michele Graves volunteered her husband Keith - owner of Brown & Graves Lumber - to donate lumber."

Rick Jandrey and his wife Kathy combined forces to build the cedar arbor. Hillcrest parent and NASA engineer Steve Johnson built the shade canopy.

Bob Beiswenger, owner of Akron Tractor & Equipment Inc.,

was another one of those "volunteered husbands" who went well beyond the call of duty in excavating the site.

Lines' husband Scott worked with her and the rest of this eager bunch, digging in the mud during April's unseasonable cold and driving rains.

Lines said most of them were so muddy most of the time, they were hard pressed to recognize each other Sunday evening, when they showed up in their clean clothes.

When it came to the garden, no one - it seemed - was off limits for Lines. She even corralled her neighbor Dale Ileo into putting in the drain tile.

Sandy Deveny, whose son was in Matthew's class, coordinated the memorial unit, which was an awesome responsibility, considering that she sold 350 bricks for a memorial.

The bricks, as well as the two memorial boulders, were engraved by Mike Buzzi of North Hill Marble & Granite.

"One of my favorite parts is the keystone in the middle that has the sun and the name Hillcrest Nature Center - where knowledge grows - K-3," Lines said. Incidentally, she says her occupation is "raising three very enchanting children for a living."

My favorite part is the colorful birdhouses that sprout alongside the bouquet of bright blossoms.

"The education area has 12 areas of 8-foot-by-8-foot raised beds with themed gardens," Lines said.

The themes include a pumpkin patch, a worm farm and rotting log and an artifact garden complete with planters made from a soccer ball, Coke can and a wagon.

"The most exciting part was the children's involvement. A lot of them started their plants indoors, got to see them grow and then

later came out and planted them in the beds. Lori Nelson's kindergarten class started spinach, mustard and lettuce inside. On the last day of school, they harvested their crops and had a salad."

Another class did a butterfly garden.

"Our intention is to label all of the plants with their common and Latin names (to) provide an educational aspect to the children," Lines said.

"Another portion of the garden is the picnic tables donated by Akron Plastics Industry through Bruce Petersen. The tables, which are made from recycled milk cartons, not only provide an outdoor classroom but also demonstrate recycle benefits to the children."

Another component of the memorial garden is a memorial bench that was donated by Goodyear. Matthew's father is employed by Goodyear.

A second bench is coming from the Richfield Village Police and Fire departments.

The Smith family worked on the garden alongside the rest of their Hillcrest School family.

"It's really nice. We like it a lot," Liz Smith said of the blossoming landscape.

"Matthew would have liked it, too," she said, her voice trailing off.

The inscription on one of the memorial boulders was rock-solid accurate:

"Matthew G. Smith. He loved birds. He loved nature. He loved all of life. He laughed. He cried. He played hard. He loved his family and friends and was deeply loved by all of us."

It's like I was saying. This is a magnificent garden built by love.

Jewell Cardwell can be reached at 330-996-8567.

Lantern May 12, 1997

Hillcrest garden becomes reality

by Laura Johnston

A man works the dirt, pushing the muddy soil into troughs marked by the straight white stakes in the lonely brown earth, soon to come to life. The newest addition to Hillcrest Elementary School, a memorial and educational garden is being planned and planted between the three oldest, original, c-shaped classroom wings.

The Hillcrest Garden, which has been in the planning stage since late last fall, is about to become a reality. The garden will include Memorial Plaza, dedicated to kindergartener Matthew Smith who died of cancer in December, and an outdoor classroom.

The plaza is to be a wild bird theme garden which will have permanent plantings to attract birds, as well as bird feeders, bird houses, and bird baths, according to the April *Bath Country Journal*. Granite benches, which are also included in the plans, will be a lasting

tribute to Smith and allow other children to enjoy nature, as he often did.

The educational part of the garden is the 11 plots of dirt that different classes can use. These plots have been set up for composting, earthworms and decomposing, growing herbs, and growing vegetables.

Beyond the garden, picnic tables are in the plans for an outdoor classroom where teachers can teach when the weather is nice. Hillcrest principal Fred Tomei said that it is a place where students, staff, and the community can relax.

Fundraising chairperson Carolyn Faist said that the plots should be ready to use in May and the Memorial Plaza should be completed by August.

According to Faist, a planning committee began meeting in January, once every couple weeks, and



(photo by Sean Wheeler) This dull dirt will soon be transformed into a blooming and lively garden.

everyone was very excited about it.

The excitement hasn't stopped. Tomei commented, "There has been an unbelievable amount of support from the community." Faist stated that the entire community has donated time and materials, as well as money. The kids at Hillcrest participated in a "Name the Garden" contest, but the name is yet to be determined. As illustrated by one excited young boy who ran up to Tomei

and blurted out, "Mr. Tomei, is there a name for the garden yet?" the energy level is sky high at Hillcrest.

Brick pavers can be purchased for anywhere from \$5 to \$150, which include inscriptions and/or logos. Faist said enough bricks have been sold to break even.

Tomei stated the garden will achieve, "Remembrance of Matthew Smith and an outdoor educational facility at Hillcrest."

Hillcrest students remember their classmate

by Missy Stultz

An entire kindergarten class, including their teacher, searches the classroom for a young classmate's lost hat. After quite a search, the hat appears on top of a desk. "Matthew put it there," the young boy says, his eyes full of love and belief. This boy is referring to his very good friend Matthew Smith who passed away earlier this year. Although Matthew is gone, his spirit still survives with amazing strength in Mrs. Gladys Liss's 96-97 kindergarten class.

Cancer of the adrenal gland was the killer of this young, lively boy who loved both school and life.

Matthew, who was diagnosed with the cancer at the age of three, fought this disease for three years. While in school, he "enjoyed every minute," according to his teacher, Liss. Overall, he enjoyed swinging, riding the bus, and playing with the other children. He was not at all pampered because of his illness, and he participated in gym and other games with the children in his class.

After the death of young Matthew, Hillcrest school nurse, Nancy Pankuch, explained the situation to the students in Matthew's class. "The kids were wonderful," she said. They had a few questions

about contagious diseases and death itself, but most of the children handled the loss rather well.

Matthew's kindergarten class strives to keep his memory and spirit in the classroom in many ways. They keep a rainbow for him hanging in their classroom window, and they often sing the song, "I'm a Little Teapot" because it was one of his favorites. While Matthew was alive, he enjoyed life and school and had many caring friends. Now that he is gone, his family, friends, and teachers remember him fondly as a sweet, lively young boy.