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Wednesday, Feb. 8, was the three-month anniversary of the death of Leonard City Councilwoman and Leonard Elementary teacher Tammy Barnes. While difficult, friends, co-workers and former students chose to honor her - on what would have been her 46th birthday - by breaking ground on the first trees planted in the Leonard ISD Outdoor Learning Classroom, a project Barnes was co-conspirator on with friend and co-worker Sheri Watson. The teachers' dream of students learning in the area still under construction on the north side of Leonard Elementary came to fruition even before the space was completed as Barnes' former students were instructed on the proper techniques of planting trees and got a hands-on lesson in her honor.

The Outdoor Learning Classroom was originally a creative vision of Watson, though it quickly became a tag-team project as she approached Barnes about helping her - specifically with obtaining grant money to fund it - and Barnes, as was always the case when it came to helping kids, jumped in head first without a second thought. The first funds were obtained in 2009 through First Choice Power's Reduce Your Use Grant, which provides funds to Texas schools, chambers and non-profits who are looking to make energy-efficient upgrades, products and programs. At that point, the project was off the ground.

Once the grant money was obtained, the teachers enlisted high school science teacher Terry Phifer, who, together with some of his students, has been the physical mover and shaker for the space.

"If I say I want something, Phifer makes it happen," said Watson. "He has brought over many of his high school students and they have done most of the dirty work, which is very hard to replace."

The group has moved rock, dug holes, and moved dirt to make the pond currently in place, among many, many other things. In fact, it was Phifer and John Alexander from Bear Creek Country Store who showed and taught the children on Feb. 8 how to plant the new trees. The two men thoroughly explained each process and why it was valuable in order for the tree to survive and thrive, and even helped the kids as they took over the gardening tools to do the work.

The vision for the space is big, and Watson hopes to see even more support from the community. So far, they have had a great response with her father, Joe Sudderth, and his company, Sudderth Construction, building the bridge, tables and benches, Sign Werks making signs for each bed and Rita Beegle donating fish. On Feb. 8, Watson was handed a bag of seeds from somebody at the tree planting who wished to donate.

She plans to encompass a variety of learning topics - including nature, science, horticulture, physics and chemistry - through a variety of features, which Watson hopes eventually will include a waterfall, greenhouse, waterwheel, flagpole, windmill, beds of Texas wildflowers, “Ms. B’s Science Lab” (to honor the former teachers who had a passion for science experiments) and compost pile. These are long-term goals, but short-term, it’s the simple things that are needed, such as wheelbarrows, shovels, gloves, hoes, rakes, birdhouses, hoses and other gardening products - in addition to funds.

“We would love for any master gardeners in our area to contact the school if they are interested in teaching the children and planting with us,” Watson said. “We are working closely with the ladies in the cafeteria so we can grow vegetables the children can actually eat. If we ever have a surplus of food, we plan on donating to our local food pantry.”

Watson encouraged anyone in separating mode or who might have bulbs they don’t want to consider donating them for the outdoor classroom. Anything will be greatly appreciated. The teachers received a second grant this past fall from First Choice Power and Watson is looking at other possible grants that will help the project. Anyone wishing to make donations - funds or tools, etc. - can contact Watson at 903-587-2316 ext. 204 or Leonard Elementary Principal Brad Maxwell at 903-587-2316 ext. 200.

Watson said if it weren’t for the support the two received from Leonard ISD Superintendent Larry LaFavers and Maxwell, the classroom would not be possible.

“Anything we have needed or anytime I need to talk, they always listen,” Watson said.

“We both wanted this to be a place of discovery and happiness. Tammy’s spirit will always be alive and well at Leonard Elementary School. I will never forget that beautiful smile and I know everyone will want to see this through for her.”

The trees planted in her honor on Feb. 8 were three different varieties of peach trees - such a fitting representation of Barnes’ personality.





























