

Memorial Garden For Anna Lowe Helps To Heal Peoples' Hearts

While Her Life Was Too Short, Her Friends Are Creating A Lasting Memory

By Melissa O'Brien

Every now and then, if you visit Anna Lowe's memorial garden at Benito Middle School, you may just see a special guest. Peeking around a gardenia bush might be a small bunny rabbit who likes to check out the progress of the almost completed retreat. The bunny has been visiting there since the garden was first conceptualized. It watched the day that some 40 girl scouts, school administrators, parents and Anna's family discussed what they envisioned for this special memorial to a child whose inspiring life was cut too short.

"When my husband, Bill, and I come here to work on the garden, we sometimes see the bunny," says Anna's mother, Beth Lowe. "We see it as a sign of Anna being here. She always loved nature and this garden is a special way of leaving a memory Anna behind at the school, so that people can remember her for her loving, giving and acceptance of others."

Anna Lowe was just 13 years old when she was killed last September in an ATV (All-Terrain Vehicle) accident in Tennessee. Even though she was wearing a helmet, she suffered a brain hemorrhage when the vehicle accidentally overturned. Her death not only impacted the New Tampa community, but also the community of Jellico, Tennessee, where Anna was staying with her grandparents and attending school while her mother underwent major back surgery. She was planning to come back to her Grand Hampton home before her death. Memorials took place in both areas, as each community tried to cope with Anna's loss.

The memorial garden at Benito Middle School (10101 Cross Creek Blvd.) is located in a private corner behind the building. It will include a wall of colorful memorial tiles that are being made with the help of You Do The Dishes, a plaque with Anna's picture, a table adorned with friends' handprints and a bench for quiet reflection. "The garden was

the idea of Anna's Girl Scout Troop #1714," says Beth. "Anna's Girl Scout sisters first came up with the idea as a way of remembering Anna. Then, all of her eighth grade classmates soon joined in, wanting to leave something behind as they moved on to high school. Leslie Vernon-Blake (Anna's troop leader since first grade) and the girl scouts and their mothers have played an instrumental role in making this happen. Dr. Bobby Smith (Benito's principal) has supported and helped along the way, as well."

What is now the garden was not always the most beautiful spot at the school. "The spot chose itself because it was the kind of place that needed to be adopted," says Smith, describing a once plain and barren section of the school. "Anna would have adopted it. She was the kind of kid if something needed to be done to help, she would do it. The space now pays tribute to a wonderful student and it perpetuates the spirit that Anna brought to the school. Participating in this garden was a way to release emotions in a positive way and offer some closure to people. It has helped many of our faculty members and Anna's family and friends."

Smith says that the school will help maintain the garden with the assistance of the Girl Scouts and other community members who have pledged to maintain it. "As far as its future care, the Girl Scouts will continue perpetual endowment for it. Some of our students have mentioned they would like to continue care for the garden as an ongoing tribute to Anna. Our graduating eighth graders are welcome to visit the garden when they want to do so."

Vernon-Blake, who lives in Hunter's Green, says that it is easy to see the impact Anna had on the people around her. "Being in Anna's presence was a special experience for anyone who knew her," says Leslie. "When our troop got together to discuss what they wanted to do for their Silver Award project (Girl Scouts who reach the level of Cadet at 13-14 years old work together on a major community service project that will have a lasting effect) they decided unanimously to create a permanent memorial space at Benito Middle School in Anna's memory. They decided that our troop would lead the project, but that anyone who wanted to participate could do so. We wanted to make the Lowe

family a big part of it, because they are a part of our Girl Scout family. On a personal level, I was encouraged by the idea that this project was something that could keep the Lowes close to us – working side by side with them.”

Blake says that the girls’ commitment to the project has been unwavering. “Watching the degree of passion they have about this project and how much they are willing to put into it is amazing,” she says. “They are using their time and creativity to create something beautiful. Generally, with everything on their plates and at this age level, it is hard for them to focus. But when you see the level of dedication and passion they have for this project, it has been so inspiring and beautiful to watch. They say ‘This is our friend. This is a lasting legacy and we can pay tribute to her in this way.’”

Anna’s best friend, Heather Montgomery, says that working on the garden is helpful way for her to heal. “Whenever I work in the garden, it just feels good to be doing something for my friend,” says Heather, who is in eighth grade at Benito. “I just want people to see that the garden is beautiful just like the amazing person she was. I want people to say, ‘Wow this person was special to have all of these friends make this for her.’ She always loved everyone and never excluded anyone. She always had a smile on her face.”

Anna’s impact is not only felt here in New Tampa, but she is well known in Jellico for her kind and giving nature. Anna’s passion, according to Beth, was to create a Boys & Girls Club in Campbell County, Tennessee – a poor, rural area. “Anna was looking forward to coming home to Tampa, but loved it in Tennessee because she spent her summers there with her grandparents. She kept busy with her Nana, whose goal – along with Anna’s – was to raise money to start a local Boys and Girls Club. It is a very poor county and she saw a great need for the children there. One time, her grandmother had become discouraged with the fundraising process. Anna said to her, ‘Nana, you can’t stop. These kids need help.’ She was always very encouraging to her Nana.”

True to Anna’s spirit, the project to create the Boy’s & Girls Club has not stopped. In fact, Anna’s adopted community in Jellico has raised money for the effort and her parents

have set up a website, www.annasmiles.org to continue her raising funds. On May 6, Troop 1714 and other friends of Anna's held a tile-making and fundraising event at the school to help raise money for the Boy & Girls Club. "Anna was always very in tune with the fact that there were people less fortunate than her," says Vernon-Blake. "Now, her friends are putting forth positive efforts to keep her memory alive and they are celebrating Anna's life. There is no doubt in my mind that her spirit lives on."

For more information about Anna Lowe or to donate funds for Boys & Girls Club of Campbell County, Tennessee, visit www.annasmiles.org.