

Memorials are an avenue of remembrance

BY ERIN ANDERSEN/Lincoln Journal Star

When she was a youngster, Tawyna Douglas' grandmother often took her to Cooper Park for picnics, walks and playtime.

Now Douglas plans to place a memorial park bench, dedicated to her late grandmother, Reva Ridgway, at Cooper Park. She hopes to engrave the bronze plaque with her grandmother's favorite psalm: "This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it."

The memorial will be a tribute to Ridgway — a woman who practically raised Douglas from childhood, a woman who dedicated her life to her South Salt Creek neighborhood and Cooper Park. A woman who died July 2002 and donated her body to science, so others might learn and have a better life.

Ridgway has since been cremated. When her husband dies, her cremains will go with him to Kansas City for burial.

"I wanted something here for her," Douglas said of her decision to have a memorial.

She considered several options — trees, flowers, a brick at Sunken Gardens, a drinking fountain.

She chose a park bench with the vision of seeing other grandparents and grandchildren, families and friends gathering to rest and enjoy the park Ridgway so loved.

Memorials are an avenue of remembrance, said Tom Roper, general manager of Roper and Sons. "They are also an avenue and part of the grief process. People want some place to go and reflect and remember things about that individual."

Memorials are as individual as the people they memorialize.

Some are flower-covered roadside crosses marking the spot of a tragic accident. Roper recalls making a cross decorated in ivy in honor of a man killed in a traffic accident.

The man's wife said the cross was an important reminder of "where my husband left this earthly world."

Roper, himself, places flowers upon his mother's grave and even made a marker to let others know where his faithful dog of 12 years is buried.

"I don't want the dog forgotten," he said. "I don't want anybody forgotten. They are important. Everybody's life is important for something."

So honoring their memory can be a lasting tribute. Some ask for monetary donations to a cause or organization that was important to them or to their family. Some plant a tree or flowers. Some engrave a paving stone with their loved one's name.

Some donate money for programs and scholarships. Some donate works of art, sculptures, exhibits or something much bigger.

When 7-year-old Brad Cuda was hit by a van on his way home from Prescott Elementary School in March 1981, his family wanted to honor their spunky young son the best way they could.

Dan and Jeanne Cuda donated their son's kidneys and corneas for transplant.

Money memorials were used to design and build the pony barn and riders' "loading dock" at the Lincoln Children's Zoo. Dan Cuda, his father and father-in-law helped construct it.

"The zoo was one of his favorite places," Dan Cuda said of Brad. And the Cuda's two older children were Zoo Crew members at the time of Brad's death.

The barn is a “touchstone” for their family, said Jeanne Cuda.

“That is something my grandchildren know is built in memory of their uncle. They hear stories about him and see pictures of him.”

Jeanne Cuda said she was surprised at how much that barn and its memorial plaque touch people. Last year, she met a woman whose son had attended Prescott with Brad.

“She said that whenever her son is in town he takes his nieces and nephews to the zoo to point out that this barn is in memory of his friend, and he tells them about Brad,” said Jeanne Cuda.

People have a need to remember, Tom Roper said.

Last year a woman held a public ladybug release ceremony in honor of her child and husband, who were killed in an automobile accident, said Sue Carraher, interim director of the Lincoln Children’s Museum.

“The little boy had loved ladybugs,” Carraher said.

David Wysong, had the museum’s oversized rocking chair and accompanying little rocking chair commissioned in memory of his wife, Sally Wysong, a longtime child educator.

Frequently memorials grace public places — places where others will benefit from the memory and love of the person now gone.

“It’s a beautiful remembrance for a person,” Carraher said. “It’s a celebration of their life. ... It’s a celebration where other people can come and enjoy something in a person’s memory and not focus on the sad part.”

Lincoln’s Children’s Zoo is filled with those celebratory remembrances.

“I think the reason people like to do memorials for the zoo is because the zoo is all about life,” said John Chapo, executive director. “Life continues and life changes. What a wonderful way to celebrate a loved one than to celebrate their life with more life.”

The zoo — and its visitors — have benefitted from numerous memorials. Animals for the zoo’s Critter Encounter area were bought using memorial funds for a teenager killed in an accident.

A bronze statue of a wood duck is in memory of former pediatric dentist Dr. Bill Best; a bronze eagle is in memory of Norma Young; a bench in front of the wallabies honors a woman who loved vacationing in Australia; and Camelot Commons Education Center is in memory of former Zoo School students Courtney Cusick and Michael Berg, who were killed in a car accident in January, 2002.

Just last week, the zoo put the finishing touches on “Josh’s Pond,” a memorial just outside the Zoo School in honor of Joshua Fuenning, one of the school’s first students, who died in a traffic accident in January, 2005.

“It is a beautiful memorial,” Chapo said.

“Without memorials the zoo would have less to present and share. There would be fewer programs,” Chapo said.

Stacy Roach, park planning assistant for Lincoln Parks and Recreation, said memorials add greatly to the amenities and offerings in the city’s parks.

“A memorial is a nice way to honor someone,” Roach said. “It gives people a sense of pride. Not only do people take pride in our community, but they know that the person they are memorializing would be proud, too.”

Tawyna Douglas hopes to have everything for her grandmother's memorial ready by June 1 — which would guarantee the bench would be installed this summer.

Douglas' plan is to invite family and friends to Cooper Park.

"It would be a chance for us to remember her, talk about her and a chance for all of us to get together," Douglas said. "It would be nice."

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