

Sunday, July 13, 2003

Storyteller's garden an inspiration

by Lisa Gagnon

There is a sacred space in, of all places, Wapakoneta. There, you can touch stone that's four billion years old. You can pass through two grindstones on a stone walkway to a temple dedicated to the concept of tolerance. You can wend your way through paths smothered by vegetation, discovering hidden treasures around each corner. And on Thursday nights, you can hear some bluegrass musicians jam.

You can't pay money to enter. The only fee is the will to enter. What you take away with you is always more than what you entered with.

Jim Bowsher claims he built his stone garden for children. I believe he built it for the child in all of us, that inquisitive, generous, unbounded, explorational spirit that is humanity's only hope for the future.

Every rock has a story. Many of the banded rocks were left in the wake of the glaciers and are millions of years old. Jim transported them, sometimes using a horse and wagon, over the course of 20 years. He, the children and friends placed most of them by hand, just as our long-ago ancestors built their monuments.

He took pieces from local monuments - parapets and cornices - to construct new monuments. He brought in discarded tablets abandoned by monument companies. People came to his garden and gave him stones, instructing him where they needed to be placed.

The centerpiece of the garden, the "Temple of Tolerance" is built upon compacted blue clay and rises about 30 feet above the ground. It's a place where people can express their feelings and beliefs without criticism. All religions, all races, all beliefs are welcome.

Local children can be found in the garden every day. They climb the "Temple of Tolerance", play hide-and-seek among the paths, peer into the huge barrel-shaped building. No one shushes them here or tells them to behave. Occasionally, they gather around Jim as he tells them a story.

Jim is many things - an expert in archeology, old books, geology; a teacher; a lecturer; an author; and, always, a storyteller. A tanned man with long silver hair tied back with rawhide, he gestures with enthusiasm, not for effect.

He tells stories of Wapakoneta history, not always the brave stories of a new frontier that the local chamber of commerce would want you to hear. He tells of the city's history as a Ku Klux Klan town. He tells of the persecution of Irish Catholics by Irish Protestants. He tells of how the Europeans stole the land from the Native Americans. They are gripping, enthralling, emotional stories because they are real. He tells me he wants to be "a voice for the voiceless."

He tells of how football great Jim Brown had to go to Lima to get a meal after being refused service in Wapakoneta because he was black. He tells of talking to inmates at the Lima Correctional Institute, inmates he insists are not so different from you or me. He tells the stories of soldiers, of meeting the last Civil War veteran who actually served at Gettysburg and shaking his hand.

He doesn't tailor his stories to his audience, but the children listen...and they learn. They learn that a man's value is in his works, not in his skin color. They learn that war is not glorious. They learn that the enemy, depicted as a monster, is just like them. They learn that God can work through people without their knowledge or volition. They learn that a person's worth is counted by more than just how much money he has.

I listen, too, as he turns my preconceptions, my misconceptions, my prejudices upside down, inside out and sideways. He juxtaposes stereotypes with radical truths and uncovers the irony of our cultural mores. I listen as he blows the doors of my mind wide open. So many new thoughts tumble around inside my mind that I can't seize one.

"Bring your friends," he urges. I'll do that, but more than my friends need to hear this man, need to experience what I did. So, come with me back to the garden.