

“A Labor of Love” by Matthew Hufford

Dunbar’s backyard has changed; and, no, it’s not the result of frustrated cafeteria employees. Rather, according to Linda Noffsinger, one of the garden’s many workers and the parent of a former Dunbar student, “It is a labor of love.”

That labor of love began after the loss of Josh Shipman in the fall of 2006: the Dunbar Gay-Straight Alliance wanted a place to not only remember him and others lost in Dunbar’s then 16-year-old history, but also a space created for reflection. Ideas were considered but ultimately, a garden; a living, growing, space was decided upon. Having requested the area outside the cafeteria to use and while still exploring options on the plan for the garden, the GSA lost another member, Jesse Higginbotham.

Jesse had been actively involved in the planning of the garden and was helping the GSA find contacts and supplies. He had asked his mother, Rebecca Woloch, to help. Throughout those tragic first days after the loss of Jesse, she found the time to put her energy and resources into this project. Plans for the garden were drawn up and outlined on graph paper; these plans were then forwarded to the Fayette County Board of Education; the project was granted approval on June 25th.

07/07/07 marked the first day of what has since become a continuous labor of love: Stacy Borden, an arborist and avid "native plant" proponent helped direct the tilling of the beds and the addition of compost donated by Elaine Pence of Landscaper's Corner. Over thirty people showed up on that day, a number that has remained consistent each Saturday. Word of the garden project began to spread:

With the publication of an article in the *Lexington Herald-Leader* as well as another piece written in *G3 Illustrated*, additional offers of assistance and donations began arriving.

To date, the garden has received support from the Kentucky Native Plant Society, the UK-LFUCG Arboretum as well as various horticulturalists, arborists, and landscape designers. Monetary donations have been received from the Kentucky Organ Donor Affiliates (Jesse's donated organs saved four lives and restored sight to two people), the Dunbar Band Parents Association, the Dunbar Class of 2009, the Fayette County Conservation District as well as a variety of individual donations received at both the Memorial Service held for Jesse in April and they continue still.

Besides monetary contributions, the volume of individuals who have to date given hundreds of hours, are the most important asset of the work being completed. Friends of Jesse and Josh came in droves; within one month's time, nearly 100 people have given their time and energy to this labor of love. Others from around the community came to share their talents having suffered their own grief-loss. Katharine Shaw who lost her son Tevis, an incoming freshman at UK last year; Carol Graham who mourns her son Andrew who had been a junior at Lafayette High School; and Matt Shipman, Josh's dad have worked side-by-side with students, Jesse's parents, co-workers, family members, teachers and community to help create a beautiful and positive life-force from their own personal devastation.

"This is a place where we can be a community" says Rebecca Woloch. "It is our safe-place where we can express our emotions and share our laughter and work together to

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bring about something positive, educational and heart-felt from our loss. It is amazing to see so many come together to do this."

Tanner Curtis, former vice-president of Dunbar's GSA and now a student at Western Kentucky University agrees, "The garden is a way to turn negative feelings into positive actions." Matt White, a senior at Dunbar and a fellow STLP member with Jesse said, "I think it is a great way to bring the students of the school together and to give them something to be proud of." Dunbar graduate Chelly Johnson who was a member of GSA last year commented, "It gives us all a place to refocus our energy, to work through our grief together." Sophomore James Richardson added, "After a full day of work at the garden, I am exhausted but proud of what I see happening here, and I know that Jesse and those who we work on this for would be happy."

"Working at the Garden is amazing, because you see all these people come together for one cause. Not for one person," Rebecca Brooks, a student of Bryan Station High School observed. "The atmosphere is relaxed and comfortable, and it doesn't seem like work at all. When you step back and see the tables, or all the pavers, you think: 'Wow...Did WE really do ALL of that?'" Jesse's best friend, and a senior at Dunbar, Jon Jones concurred, "Working at the garden has been an escape from normal daily pressures, and has allowed a great deal of healing to occur as a result of this labor of love."

Standing at the garden today it is difficult to recall what it once was, an area of grass and a few well-worn picnic tables. Today, there is a beautiful path composed of recycled pavers handled by many hands, three large garden plots almost ready to be planted, seven refurbished picnic tables that have been sanded and painted and brightly decorated, new green grass poking out from a straw bed. The labor of love has created a place that instills a sense of ownership among all those who have toiled there. It is a sanctuary and this labor of love is dedicated to Jesse and Josh and all the others who will never be missing from our hearts.

[Those who wish to donate to the garden either through physical labor or financial assistance are encouraged to do so. Information regarding the Memorial Garden is available online at www.jessehigginbotham.com/garden.html, by contacting Mrs. Wendy Turner at Dunbar or Rebecca Woloch at 254-3148, or rwolochxxx@gmail.com.]