



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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HOMEGROWN EFFORTS BEAUTIFYING FAYETTE COMMUNITY

Uniontown, PA – “I’m just a guy who wanted to plant some flowers.”

That’s what Brownsville resident Joe Barantovich said of his hometown improvement initiative’s unbelievable success.

A Republic native, Barantovich, 67, moved to Brownsville as a young child and grew up making memories in its neighborhoods. After college, he relocated to Miami, Fla.

Barantovich spent 40 years teaching English and coaching high school and college football, all the while maintaining his parents’ Brownsville home.

“After I retired, I started spending a lot more time here,” he said. “I didn’t want to be the guy who came back and just complained about how the streets and things looked, so I decided to do something about it.”

Inspired by the previous fundraising and beautification efforts of the Brownsville Area High School Students in Action group, Barantovich kickstarted the movement that would become known as the Perennial Project.

“Those kids raised close to \$500,000 dollars and built this beautiful stage downtown a few years ago, but after its dedication, nothing really happened; nobody remulched the place and it started looking a little shabby,” Barantovich said. “Being in education, I know how hard it is to get multiple groups of kids involved in the same project, and they were a really big part of my motivation for this.”

Barantovich took the idea to his longtime friend, Brownsville Area School District Superintendent Dr. Keith Hartbauer.

“He immediately jumped on board and, because of his backing, I was able to meet with the district’s coaches and club sponsors,” Barantovich said. “Once they jumped on board and brought the students and teachers with them, it was all about just talking to people, the rotary, American Legion, Eagles, local businessmen, everyone - and it just grew so quickly.”

The Perennial Project’s first initiative was a cleanup day in May, which Barantovich called his “biggest, most nerve-wracking experience.” Expecting only one or two people to show up, he couldn’t believe it when about 100 volunteers arrived to help.

“It was amazing. We moved dirt that was older than dirt that day,” Barantovich said, adding workers “attacked” the streets and hillsides along the borough’s main thoroughfare, collecting garbage, pulling weeds and much more.

Because of the municipality's limited tax revenue, Barantovich said, it's sometimes hard to maintain regular cleanup efforts.

"When Brownsville was booming, we had 14 street workers for 22 miles of borough streets," he said. "Today, we've still got 22 miles of streets, but we're down to just two workers. The borough guys work hard, but they can't keep up with everything alone."

Last month, Brownsville high school students once again volunteered their time, energy and creativity to help the Perennial Project by painting murals and installing other art pieces throughout downtown.

On a rainy day, student volunteers used recycled plastic bottles and basic supplies to create unique Chihuly-like sculptures, which will be displayed among other local art pieces downtown.

After cleaning up the area surrounding the Cast Iron Amphitheatre, Barantovich set his sights on the Perennial Project's first community event: Brownsville Kids' Night.

"I really wanted to utilize the stage and bring some culture to the borough," he said. "We did all this work, so it's time to start getting things going down there and I just started thinking about how we could do that."

The free festivities kick off 6 to 8:30 p.m. tonight at the amphitheatre in Brownsville's downtown Snowdon Square.

In addition to various children's activities, the event will feature a performance by Greensburg-based theatre company Stage Right. The one-of-a-kind show is based on the award-winning book "Della and Lila Meet the Monongahela Mermaid."

The book, written by Brownsville resident Brianne Bayer Mitchell and her daughters, Della and Lila, will be sold throughout the event, with proceeds benefiting southwestern Pennsylvania families in need. The authors will also be on site for a meet and greet.

Kona Ice will sell sweet treats throughout the evening, along with other vendors. A face painter will bring a special mermaid palate and offer mermaid hairstyles for children.

Additionally, the Perennial Project will dedicate its volunteers' bottle sculptures in a special ceremony during Brownsville Kids' Night.

"The overall goal of the Perennial Project is to start at the ground and work our way up, because if you're going to do anything in life, you have to start with what you can do; if you want to initiate change, you initiate it where you can," Barantovich said. "I can't do anything about the empty buildings at this point, but the end goal is to have some businesses downtown again. We're trying to market Brownsville as something it hasn't been for quite a while, so anything we can do to get people talking or increase traffic in town has got to be a good thing for us."

Barantovich said the Fayette Chamber of Commerce, Brownsville Chamber of Commerce and Fayette County Commissioners have been "outstanding supporters" of the Perennial Project - which he named with the future in mind.

"I want to make sure our efforts - the cleanup day, everything - come back every year and don't die off. We don't want to just do something once and have it stop," he said. "We're already talking about our

plans for next year, which are a lot more than what I originally thought they'd be when I started this. Still, I'm just a guy who wants to plant some flowers."

For more information about Brownsville Kids' Night or the Perennial Project, contact Barantovich at jbarantovich@gmail.com.

To learn more about Fayette County, visit www.FayetteCountyPA.org.

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