

## Brick Shorestars Head To True National Championships

BRICK - Bricktown Shorestars 15s display their championship team trophy and certificate that states they qualified for the True National Championship in Virginia Beach, VA to be held in August.

PAGE 10



### Inside This Week's Edition

Business Directory.....19	Government.....7
Community News.....8-9	Health.....14-16
Crossword.....20	Letters To The Editor.....6
Dr. Izzy's Sound News.....14	Pet Stop.....23

# Years After Making New Jersey History, "Blueberry Class" Look Back



--Photo By Judy Smestad-Nunn

Blueberry bushes are planted in the courtyard of VMES by the original fourth-graders (now graduating from Brick Memorial HS), their former teachers and the representatives from Whitesboro Trust.

By Judy Smestad-Nunn

The NJ state flower is the purple violet; the state bird is the Eastern Goldfinch; the state insect is the honeybee; the state tree is the red oak; and thanks to the efforts of the fourth-grade students at Veterans Memorial Elementary School seven years ago, the state fruit is the blueberry.

Those students—whose lobbying campaign resulted in the passage of Assembly Bill 3344, making the blueberry the state fruit—are now graduating from high school.

Some of those students returned to VMES last week, along with their former teachers, current fourth-graders and dignitaries, for

a presentation and the planting of two blueberry plants.

Most of the former fourth-graders who came back for the ceremony are graduating from Brick Memorial High School.

**Just to be back here for a reunion feels so good. I was so excited at the time.**

-- Dylan Stalfa, 18

Staci Lavbavskas, 18, said she has good memories from the experience. "It's been eight years from watching it become a bill; to come back to plant a blueberry bush, and to see it evolve so much from what we little kids did, means a lot," she said.

The dignitaries on hand included Assemblyman David W. Wolfe, who introduced the bill to the State Assembly, and two representatives from Whitesbog Preservation Trust, who

(History - See Page 3)

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## History:

*Continued From Page 1*

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donated the plants.

Whitesbog Village, located in Browns Mills, is the birthplace of the cultivated blueberry, thanks to the work of Elizabeth C. White, whose family operated a 3,000-acre cranberry farm in mid 1800's, which was the largest cranberry bog in NJ.

In 1911, Elizabeth and her father entered into a partnership with the USDA to cultivate the very first blueberries in the world, said Susan Phillips, executive director of Whitesbog Village, at the ceremony.

"We are here to honor the blueberry's centennial, and to recognize the Veteran Memorial fourth-graders' efforts in making the blueberry the state fruit," she said.

Whitesbog Village is celebrating the centennial with a Blueberry Festival on June 25, and Phillips invited all the students to attend the festival as guests of the Trust.

Teachers Gail Damiano and Suzanne Kurasz, who still teach at VMES, were the two fourth-grade teachers who guided and encouraged their students eight years ago.

"We used to teach NJ history, and we talked about state symbols," Damiano said. "We talked about other state symbols and we zeroed in on a state fruit. NJ didn't have one, so we held an election between the cranberry, peach, tomato and blueberry," she recalled.

"It was based on factual information, and the history of the fruit. For example, was it native to NJ? Some of them weren't...so the two classes came up with the blueberry,"

she said.

Dylan Stalfa, 18, said he remembers going on a lot of field trips in support of the Blueberry Bill.

"We went to Trenton, NY...we met Governor McGreevy...just to be back here for a reunion feels so good. I was so excited at the time," he said.

After the class voted on the fruit, Kurasz contacted Assemblyman Wolfe, who liked the idea, Damiano said, and he had a bill drafted.

"We went to Trenton, and he had it read on the floor of the State Assembly and we were able to watch the vote on closed circuit TV," Damiano said. "We saw the bill pass in the Assembly; Assemblyman Wolfe said the children inspired him," she said.

That's true, said Wolfe. "People always ask me about legislation, and I say if you really have an idea, stick together, and stick with it. It's one of the proudest things that has happened to me," he said to the crowd. "The blueberry will always be the state fruit because of those boys and girls."

Brandon Barboza, 17, said he still has the blueberry symbol on his refrigerator at home. "I look back and show people that I was part of the bill—everyone had a big part. It took a lot to get the bill passed. Another school was trying to get the tomato passed at the same time," he said.

"Today is an opportunity to get the kids back together before college to reminisce," said Kurasz. "It was an important event in their lives and our lives. All laws are living documents and can be changed at any time. We can still make a difference," she said.