

7 YEARS AGO, FOURTH-GRADERS PUSHED TO HAVE BLUEBERRY MADE THE STATE FRUIT



Original "Blueberry Bill" kid Jim Mageros (right) 17, watches as Whitesbog Preservation Trust Executive Director Susan Burpee Phillips plants a new blueberry bush Thursday at the Veterans Elementary School in Brick. Also shown are Fourth-grade students Sophie Ericksen and Kristen Acosta, both 9. THOMAS P. COSTELLO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Brick teens feted for making history

By Keith Ruscitti

Staff Writer

BRICK — It's been seven years since a group of 46 fourth-grade students from Veterans Elementary School successfully persuaded a group of state legislators to name the blueberry as the state's official fruit.

Now, those same Brick students are preparing to graduate from high school next week, days ahead of the centennial blueberry celebration held at Whitesbog Village.

The secluded village, located in Browns Mills on the border of Ocean and Burlington counties, is where a farmer's daughter named Elizabeth White originated highbush blueberry domestication in 1911.

On Thursday, Susan Burpee Phillips, executive director of Whitesbog Village, school faculty members, students and state Assemblyman David W. Wolfe, R-Ocean, were among the people assembled at the elementary school's courtyard to honor the graduates of Gail Damiano and Suzanne Kurasz's 2003 fourth-grade classes.

"It was the best experience I've ever had," said Dylan Stalfa, now 18, about his part in the 2003 campaign to promote the blueberry as one of the state's official symbols.

"There are so many awesome memories," said Jim

Mageros, 17. "Looking through the scrapbooks, two, big three-inch scrapbooks of that time, really means a lot. We were all a part of history."

The story of how the blueberry officially became the state fruit is now well-known among a large segment of the Brick community. Eight years ago, as part of a school project the two, fourth-grade classes at Veterans Elementary School went on a quest to have the state government name an official fruit for one of its symbols. Considering New Jersey's nickname was the Garden State, the students thought the omission was odd.

"We did a lot of research," remembered Alex D'Antonio, 18. "There's a state dance (the square dance) but there was no state fruit."

They lobbied state leaders, wrote letters, visited Trenton, made shirts endorsing the blueberry and convinced Wolfe, a Brick resident, and veteran state legislator to sponsor the bill.

"I still have a photo of the 'Make the blueberry a state fruit' T-shirt hanging in my office," said Wolfe.

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DAVID W. WOLFE
Assemblyman,
R-Ocean

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"I was very proud to sponsor the legislation," he said.

Originally, the students considered promoting the cranberry, the tomato and blueberry before eventually narrowing it down to between the blueberry and tomato.

"But there's the controversy over whether the tomato is a fruit, or vegetable," said Gabriella Catalano. "We didn't want to get involved with that."

Also considered in the blueberry's favor was the

fact its cultivation originated at Whitesbog Village, just a 15-mile drive west on Route 70.

Once the bill passed through both state houses, in January 2004 then-Gov. James McGreevy traveled to Veterans Elementary School to officially sign the bill making the blueberry the state fruit. It is a story that highlights the importance of organizing, perseverance and of setting goals, said the group's former teachers.

"It proves even as children you can make a difference in the community or in school" said Damiano.

Phillips, the Whitesbog Village representative, officially invited all the Brick students as guests to the annual blueberry festival, held June 25 at the village.

Additionally, two new blueberry bushes were planted in the courtyard at the school to commemorate the day.

"As teachers, we hope to have an impact on the students," said Kurasz. "But I know I'll remember everyone of those students forever."

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Guests were treated to hors d'oeuvres, a buffet dinner and lessons in Zumba, a dance-based exercise system.

Nancy Healey, executive director of the central and south Jersey affiliate of the Komen foundation, noted that most of the participants arrived by themselves — the event was only for breast cancer survivors — but they very quickly

women who cannot afford them, but earn too much money to qualify for free services, Hwang said.

Hwang said the center will perform 1,000 such mammograms this year.

"We have a wonderful partnership," Healey said.

The attendees were also scheduled to hear from Middletown resident Carol Rech, a 5-year breast cancer survivor.

"It's an honor for me to be here and to be able to speak to them," she said. "I think these women are extraordinary."

The charity seeks to help breast cancer patients with "their most pressing need, whatever it is. We try to take that burden away from them," Rech said.

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include admission to the game against Baltimore Orioles affiliate, the Hagerstown Suns. A \$2 dog pass can be purchased to bring a dog to the game. The game begins at 4:05 p.m.

Ticket must be purchased in advance. For more information contact Sandy Maseda at 732-927-3754 or email at sandyreym@gmail.com.

Staff report

Legion Auxiliary names officers

TOMS RIVER — American Legion Auxiliary Unit 129, on Church Road in the township, announced its new officers for the 2011-12 year, according to the group's secretary. They are: President Bernice Stanton, First Vice President Dina Lynam, Second Vice President Christine Karl, Secretary Mary Jane Cohen, Treasurer Mary Ellen DelNero, Historian Tara Goldstein, Chaplain Jane Keeley, and Sergeant at Arms Carol Gearinger.

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Registration set at elementary school

SEASIDE HEIGHTS — Hugh J. Boyd Jr. Elementary School on Bay Boulevard will hold its kindergarten and pre-school registration June 9,

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The town to see annua of about \$30 switch to na Varano said.

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Toms River hosts concert

TOMS RIVER winners of the Key Music Festival heard at a concert 3:15 p.m. Christ Episc 415 Washing their music t

About 15 y sicians will b ing. Five of th the township district: Joha Kristen Silvi, Intermediate North; Antho West River F