

## Etched in discs, dreams of teens survive shut mall

**The Wishing Tree sculpture, once at the Bannister shopping center, reflects a 1980 high school outlook.**

By JOYCE SMITH  
The Kansas City Star

Twenty-seven years ago, hundreds of south Kansas City high school seniors shut their eyes, made a wish and then scratched their names — and sometimes their dreams or random thoughts — on mirrored Plexiglas discs.

The 3½-inch round discs were part of a “participatory” sculpture, called the Wishing Tree, that was installed at the new Bannister Mall.

As it turns out, the discs and some of the etched wishes have been more enduring than the mall, which closed last year and may soon be demolished.

About 250 discs ended up in storage, along with the Wishing Tree, and *The Kansas City Star* was able to locate etchers from the class of 1980. Most remembered the discs, but after college, marriage, careers, children and divorces,

SEE DISC | A10

# DISC: Sweethearts signed names and the word 'wait'

**FROM A1**  
they found it difficult to recall the dreams shared half a lifetime ago.

Unlike the mall, O'Hara High School sweethearts Jim Rowland and Denise Leggio are going strong.

As teenagers, they signed their own name and each other's name to their discs with the word "wait."

Wait? To marry? Jim Rowland isn't sure.

"I was young and stupid and probably hallucinating," said Rowland, a former city councilman and executive director of the Jackson County Sports Complex Authority.

But his wife remembers. It was after a song of the time, she thinks by Jackson Browne, and referred to whether they would end up together.

"We were 17 at the time, and at that age there is a lot of uncertainty," said Denise Rowland, who married Jim in 1984. "Obviously, things have worked out quite well."

The couple's two children now attend O'Hara.

Other discs mirror the timeless dreams of teenagers — marriage, career, world peace. But some are a reflection of specific 1980s teen culture —

## THE WISHING TREE

The Bannister Mall sculpture had special meaning for south Kansas City high school graduates of the class of 1980.

**Sculptor:** Rita Blitt

**Size:** 11 feet tall and 14 feet wide

**Material:** Rust-colored painted steel ribbons with hundreds of mirrored 3½-inch Plexiglas discs signed by students of Hickman Mills High School, O'Hara High School and Ruskin High School. About 250 discs were left when the mall closed.

**Former location:** When the mall opened in 1980, the Wishing Tree was placed in front of Sears on the bottom level where it could be viewed from the second-floor balcony.

**Current location:** After the mall closed in 2006, the Wishing Tree was donated to the Hickman Mills School District, which put it into storage.

"music makes me high," "'80 Best Partyers," "Let's Do the Time Warp Again" from the 1975 cult movie favorite "The Rocky Horror Picture Show" — that would probably resonate with any 45-year-old today.

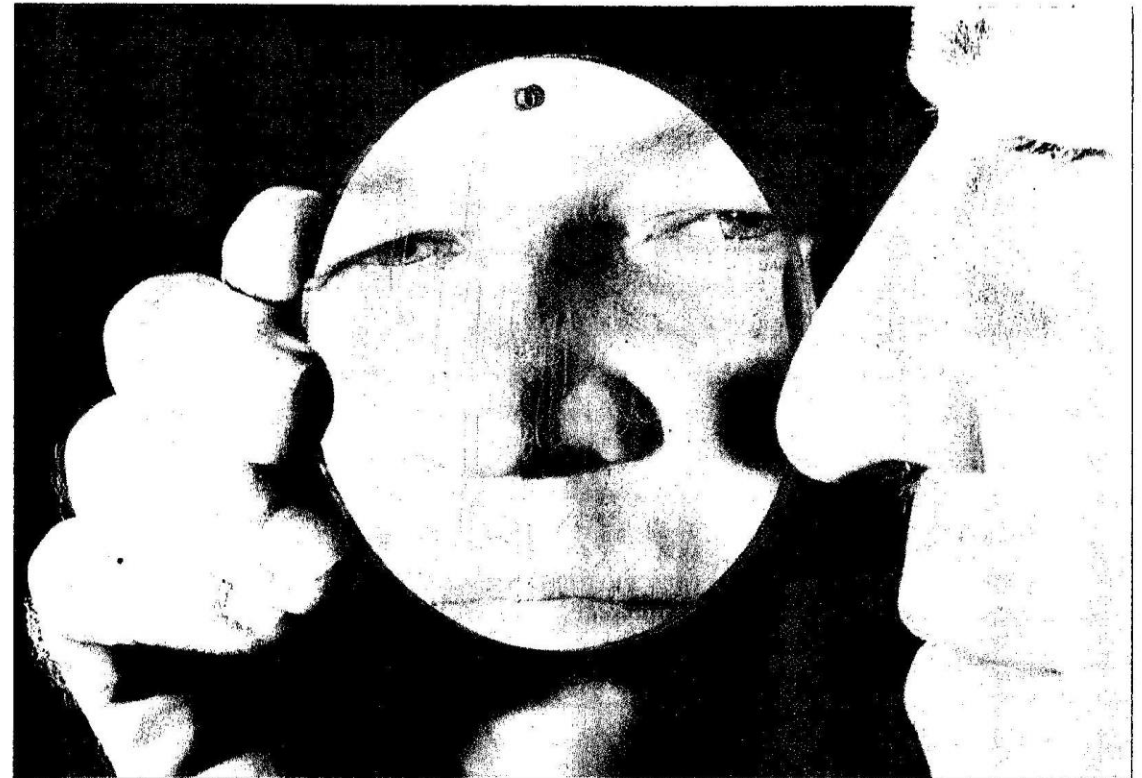
Ruskin High School senior Teresa Ernsbarger scratched a shout-out to her fellow female students: "If you want a special lady get a classy one from 80." On the back of the disc she etched "engineering." While she never became an engineer, she works in drafting and de-

sign for a Kansas City engineering company.

Kenny Van Pelt of O'Hara High School sketched an elaborate crown, which he called a tongue-in-cheek "king of the world" symbol. Now known as Ken Van Pelt, he is district art resource teacher for the Kansas City School District.

Students acknowledged their high school monikers.

O'Hara student Patrick Flavin got the nickname "bartender" for the stainless-steel, portable bartending kit he brought along to a few parties. These



JENNIFER HACK | THE KANSAS CITY STAR

**Tom Holder, now a priest, etched his nickname, "Hollywood," on the Wishing Tree disc while he was a student at O'Hara High School.**

days the Kansas City, North, resident makes dentures.

Fellow O'Hara student Tom Holder was dubbed "Hollywood," a nickname he inscribed on his disc.

"I guess it was for my thick hair and for showing up at games with sunglasses," said Holder, now a priest with St. John Francis Regis Church in south Kansas City. "I don't have thick hair anymore; I don't have near as much hair any-

more."

Today, some of these former south Kansas City students refer to Bannister Mall as "our" mall, even if they hadn't shopped there in years, and of course they call the sculpture — which spent 26 years on the first floor in front of Sears — "our" sculpture.

The sculptor, Rita Blitt of Kansas City, would like to see her piece displayed again. Blitt, whose work is sold worldwide,

provided sculptures at several area malls that were developed by her family's firm, Copaken White & Blitt.

"I just asked (the teens) to make a silent wish and sign their name," Blitt said. "I love it that they decided to put something more on it. It says to me that it was meaningful to them."

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