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MISSING WISHES

What happened to the sculptures inside Bannister Mall?

by Mary Kay Morrow • JC Advocate

Nearly 30 years ago artist Rita Blitt walked into three south Kansas City high schools and asked graduating seniors to close their eyes and make a wish.

"I thought they might make fun, but it was very successful," Blitt said.

Upon wishing, each 1980 senior at O'Hara, Hickman and Ruskin high schools signed the back of a mirrored, acrylic disk representing their wish.

Ruskin graduate Boyd Nolen was at Ruskin when disks were signed.

"The idea was that we would always be tied to the mall since we graduated the same year it opened," Nolen said. "I thought it was the coolest thing in the world."

The circles became part of Blitt's 11-foot tall, burgundy-painted steel sculpture, "Wishing Tree," each hanging from a metal hook along the undersides of the tree's branches.

Blitt had been asked to create a participatory sculpture as one of four pieces she fashioned for the opening of Bannister Mall.

"Architect Chris Ramos asked me to create a sculpture 'that the community could become part of,'" she explained.

Blitt, who bases her abstract sculptures on quick, spontaneous drawings she began in 1976, looked through her drawings and chose a tree shape as the basis for the interactive mall sculpture.

"The discs made it participatory," she said. The shimmering circles also created a kinetic effect within the mall as light bounced off the moving mirrored surfaces.

"Over the years, we'd go to up to see the tree," Nolen said. "There was a jewelry store on the lower level



up there to see it.”

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Dancing

“Dancing” was made of gold-painted steel and stood on the mall’s lower level reaching 26 feet high into the mall’s second floor.

“Much to my joy, ‘Dancing’ has been reinstalled in front of the Performing Arts Center at UMKC. I always want it to be there,” Blitt said of her work now gracing the courtyard on the campus of the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

*Photo at left, Nate Taylor
Other photos, James Maidhof*

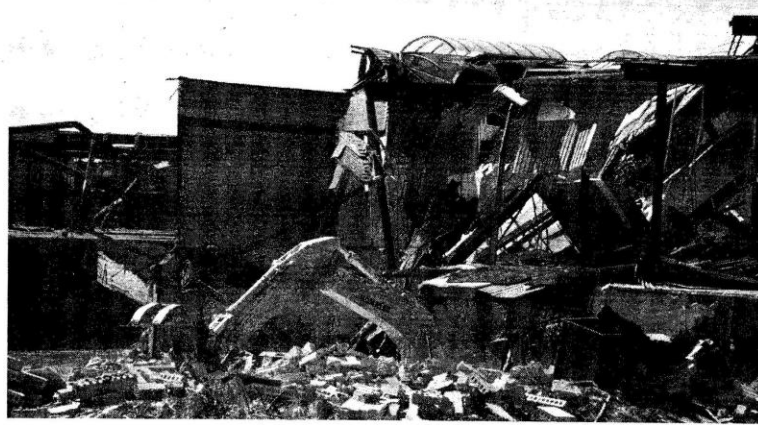
Together **MISSING**

Vandals stole Blitt’s eight-foot tall oak sculpture, “Together,” from the mall after its close.

“When Dave (Roth) went in to save it, it had been stolen,” Blitt said. “Any information you can get concerning its whereabouts would be appreciated.”

She had hoped to donate Together to Archbishop O’Hara High School “to honor Dave Roth, who has supervised the creation of my steel sculptures and fabricated wood sculptures from my patterns and instructions for over 35 years,” Blitt said last year.

Instead, Blitt designed “Together II,” a metal version of the original wooden sculpture, to honor Roth, whose children attend O’Hara. “Together II” was dedicated last April at O’Hara High School, located at 9001 James A. Reed Road.



Where shoppers once roamed, now cinder blocks and twisted steel remain. Bannister Mall is near the half-way point of demolition. According to Owen Buckley with Lane4 Development, said that the mall could be completely down by the end of summer. (Photo by Mary Kay Morrow)

Sculptures:

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This winter, as demolition of the mall began to make way for a possible soccer stadium, rumors began to swirl about the fate of "Wishing Tree" and the other sculptures that had been inside. Since its closing on May 31, 2007, much of Bannister Mall's contents have been pilfered. Nolen and others wondered what had become of their wishes.

Just before Bannister Mall closed its doors, Blitt and a handful of community leaders had the foresight to try to save the sculpture. Carol McClure of the Southern Communities Coalition remembered contacting Mary Norman, the manager of Bannister Mall, and HMC-1 Buildings Manager Ken Silvers, shortly before the mall closed.

"It took 12 men to unbolt and carry it out to the trailer," McClure said of the efforts to rescue "Wishing Tree." "They got it out just in time."

Today, some disks are missing and the giant sculpture lies like a slain dragon behind Hickman Mills' Buildings and Maintenance facility off Martha Truman Road.

Until recently, some believed the sculpture had been stolen since it was transported to Hickman Mills C-1 (HMC-1). Blitt's last memory of Wishing Tree was of it lying in a parking lot at Hickman Mills.

"I'm afraid it's been stolen," Blitt said a few weeks ago.

HMC-1 Public Information Coordinator John Baccala knew where the sculpture was.

and alumni liaison for O'Hara, retrieved about 70 of the disks. She's returned about 20 of the disks, and still trying to return about 50 more.

Nolen's idea had been to return the Ruskin disks to the graduates, but now he's waiting to see if "Wishing Tree" will be reinstalled in a new location.

The whereabouts of the rest of the disks are unknown.

Baccala thought there might have been 750 to 800 on the sculpture originally but only 75 to 100 remained when they went to rescue the sculpture from the mall.

"There was a misconception we had them all," Baccala said. "A considerable number were already gone when we got there."

"We looked high and low but we never
d i d

find
the
miss-
ing
disks,"
said HMC-
1 Assistant
Director of Buildings
and Grounds, Betty
Brown.

Asked about Wishing Tree's future, Baccala said, "We're going to do something

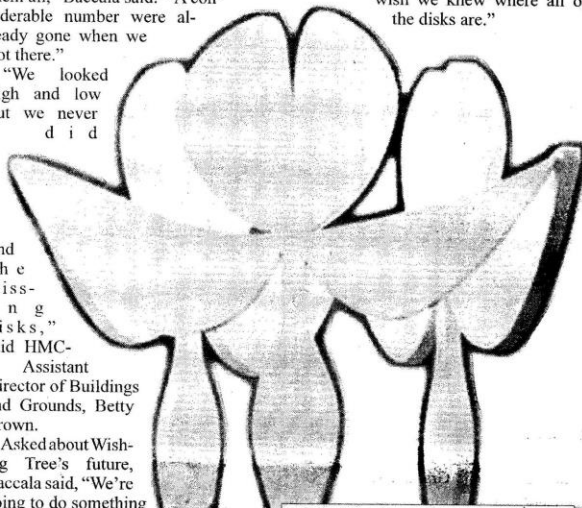
wish was about a girl he hoped to take to the prom.

His wish today is that his classmates remain close and "never forget that high school was where we formed our personalities and close relationships."

The class of 1980 was close-knit.

"We still remain close," Nolen said. "No matter where you've been, those relationships are still strong and come back real easily whenever we get together."

Nolen admitted it's upsetting the district has changed, and the mall is gone, but said, "The good memories will be forever" before adding, "Now we just wish we knew where all of the disks are."



"It's over in back of Buildings and Grounds," Baccala said. "It's been there since they took it out (of the mall) two years ago."

He's not worried it will be stolen.

"My understanding is that it weighs 1900 pounds," Baccala said.

The location of some of the wish-disks is less certain.

At the time the sculpture was moved, three or four boxes of disks "went over to (HMC-1) Central Office," said McClure.

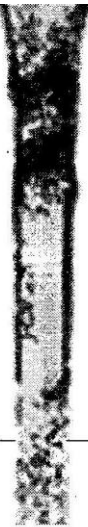
Nolen said Eileen Fratzke, a parent

with it. What that is is underdetermined at this time."

It appears the vision that Ramos and Blitt had in 1980 of a sculpture "that the community could become part of" worked.

"My friends still talk about the tree all the time," Nolen said.

In 1980, Nolen's



Trio

"Trio," made of three 26-foot tall steel pieces and painted pearlescent white, was interpreted and used throughout Bannister Mall and in marketing materials as its logo. Trio will be reinstalled during the coming year in front of the Art Center at Synergy Services in Parkville, formerly known as Synergy House, which serves as a shelter for runaway youth and homeless families in western Missouri.



Rita Blitt is an international, award-winning sculptor, painter and filmmaker whose sculptures, up to sixty feet in height, are permanently installed and

exhibited along with her drawings and paintings in museums, galleries and public places in Australia, Germany, Israel, Japan, Singapore, Taiwan and the United States.

Blitt's sculptures have graced locations throughout greater Kansas City including Hillcrest Bank on Bannister Road (1987) and Benjamin Plaza (1990).

Blitt thinks of herself as a painter who

makes sculpture. She paints in large scale using both hands at once.

"I like to move — to reach out in large gestures as far as I can," she said.

"Rita Blitt Sculptures & Paintings" is showing now through May 16 in the James Gray Gallery at Bergamot Station, Santa Monica, CA.