

NTHS Wall of Fame project hopes to inspire future generations

BY MICHAEL DEPIETRO

Interim Tribune Editor

This past March, John Baran was attending his great-nephew's home volleyball game at North Tonawanda High School when he saw something that just didn't sit right with him.

In the hallway outside the gym, he and his wife made their way past the Walls of Fame for both the NT athletics and fine arts programs. There, the plaques and trophies created to honor and memorialize NTHS's finest Lumberjacks were in poor condition – dusty, disorganized; some, like notable alumnus WKBW meteorologist Aaron Mentkowski's photo, are completely faded from decades of sunlight to the point that names and photographs were virtually erased.

As a proud alumnus from the class of 1974, Baran couldn't let the issue stand.

"I said to my wife, as we were walking down the hall, 'We have to do something about this,'" he said. "That's not how those individuals and teams should be remembered."

Fast forward six months and the NTHS Wall of Fame project committee – a cohort of volunteers, mostly NT alumni – has raised over \$34,000 and is celebrating the completion of phase 1 of its plan to repair, restore and revamp the NTHS Walls of Fame.

One piece of the initial phase included a series of new window coverings along each Wall of Fame's hallways. Created by VSP Graphic Group out of West Seneca, the coverings are made of a vinyl material and feature images that capture the history and spirit of North Tonawanda High School.

Each covering also includes the names of a prominent donor. Sponsorships were offered for \$500 a piece and helped the group raise close to \$14,000.

The coverings are more than just decoration; they also serve a vital function. By blocking out 70-80% of UV rays, the coverings ensure the protection of the trophies, plaques along the hallway from further damage. The windows along the Athletic Wall of Fame were completed in August, while the fine arts program was completed just this week.

But perhaps the most interesting addition added in the project's first phase was a 55-inch touchscreen system developed by Empire Digital Signs. The system provides an interactive way to learn about, not only the athletic and fine arts inductees (who each have their own page featuring photographs, biographies and stats), but North Tonawanda's rich history and tradition of school spirit.

Baran said he and other group members have spent thousands of hours pouring over and scanning yearbooks and other historical documents to provide a comprehensive "living history" of NTHS. By working with local organizations like the North Tonawanda History Museum and the North Tonawanda Football Hall of Fame, the group has uploaded a treasure trove of fascinating items dating back to the 1890s. From photos to old film reels, Gattas said the touchscreen allows students to recognize and experience these achievements in a way that traditional plaques



simply can't.

"People are moving away from the world of plaques and trophies. ... This is something that will be here forever. I mean, I challenge you to read some of these names (on the school's existing plaques). You need a periscope to read them (laughs)," Baran said. "With the touch screen, that's where (inductees) will really be recognized. With the photos and statistics and videos – why do a plaque when you can do it in almost three-dimensional way?"

Baran also said there's still more features coming to the touch screen system including full seasons' worth of rosters, photos and stats.

"It's going to be an evolving thing. We wanted to start with the championship teams and every inductee but we're going to include all the rosters, game-by-game breakdowns and all of the

stats," Baran said. "Technology is just so cool now."

Additionally, Baran said the full virtual database will eventually be uploaded online so that it can be experienced at any time from anywhere in the world from a computer or smartphone. The idea is that family members, no matter where they are, can take part in an inductee or an alumni's accomplishments.

Speaking with Baran about the project, his enthusiasm and commitment to the idea are infectious. His goals for the project go beyond simply honoring those that have come and gone before, but to inspire a new generation to become a part of the school's history and tradition.

As a child, Baran wasn't allowed to play sports himself. However, growing up only a few blocks away from Vedder Stadium, the community atmosphere was in-

Pictured are the new Wall of Fame creations at North Tonawanda High School.

toxicating. The smell of hot dogs; the emphatic cheers on a touchdown run; the names of neighborhood kids proclaimed over the loudspeaker – Baran knew he wanted to be a part of that experience and he vowed to himself that one day he would play college football. After a successful senior year, Baran was fortunate enough to make that dream a reality.

Now, he hopes that students, by being able to experience the Lumberjack tradition in a whole new way, will be inspired to push themselves and get involved with the programs that have made NTHS so special to its community.

"If we can impact even one or two or three kids a year to participate in a sport, to participate in the band or to go out for a play or something like that, than we have more than accomplished what our goals have been. It's really, ultimately, just about these kids," Baran said.

Fortunately for the generations that will get to experience the upgraded Walls of Fame, Baran's fellow volunteers have shared his same level of enthusiasm for the project.

"This is a really positive project and people, especially these kids, need something positive these

days," said volunteer Chet Wiech, a 1973 alumni and former football teammate of Baran. Speaking about what the project has meant to him, Wiech said he was particularly proud of the group's concerted effort to bring NT girl's sports more into focus.

"My gosh, what the girls have been able to accomplish ... it's been amazing. Three state volleyball championships, softball championships – we wanted to make sure these girls got the recognition they deserve because they've had some incredible accomplishments," Wiech said.

As he discussed his involvement with the group, from soliciting donations to helping with research, Wiech was almost giddy as he shared some of the unique findings the group uncovered that will be available on the touchscreen. Family members of NT alum and Brooklyn Dodgers Hall of Famer Stan Rojeck brought in photos of him alongside teammate Jackie Robinson and another with performer Bing Crosby. Elsewhere, the group uncovered a Converse commercial with basketball legend Dr. J and North Tonawanda basketball great Varrick Cutler.


"I mean, these are pieces of Americana, and these are the things you can see on the touch screen," Wiech said.

The ultimate importance of the project and what the group hopes to accomplish through its efforts was succinctly stated by

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