

Hughestown woman honors sister's memory at McDade Park

BY JOSEPH KOHUT
STAFF WRITER

SCRANTON — At the top of a hill, near some tennis courts, Jeanie Bantell climbed the 49 steps she and her sister used to summit during their walks through McDade Park.

After the climb, Taylor resident Joann Conroy McGurrin would turn to Bantell and remark, "They need a bench here."

On Friday, the 10th anniversary of McGurrin's death at 63, Bantell sat on the newly erected metal bench and took in the view of the Downvalley and the ski slopes of Montage Mountain. She'd planned on honoring her sister this way, but a chance meeting several weeks ago in Florida with some strangers from Luzerne County — who operate a business aimed at connecting people through stories, notebooks and benches — left her wondering if a "higher power greater than me (is) making this happen," Bantell, of Hughestown, said.

Beginning on her Shavertown farm with 20 benches to celebrate 20 years of marriage, Beth Romanowski founded The Bench Project

as more than a way to rest during a walk. The project also hopes to foster human connection with a notebook tucked away in a weather-proof bag hooked to the bench. Anyone who encounters a Bench Project bench can leave their thoughts behind to be read by others.

Within the last two years, Romanowski's project gained momentum and its website began selling benches to create new spots for people to share. Benches come with QR codes, so sitters can leave a digital journal entry behind, too.

The website now lists 38 benches or codes in 11 states. Len Romanowski, her husband, said one is planned for Ireland.

"People need connection and it's hard to come by sometimes," Beth Romanowski said.

Bantell learned about The Bench Project earlier this year while visiting Clearwater Beach, Florida, at the same time the Romanowskis did.

Bantell's husband, Tony Bantell, wore a Ryan's Run shirt, which caught Beth and Len Romanowski's eyes. The local connection sparked a

conversation and the couples exchanged phone numbers. Beth Romanowski handed Bantell a business card for The Bench Project.

"She said, 'This is divine intervention,'" Beth Romanowski recalled Jeanie

Bantell saying.

Bantell selected a bench from the project's catalog and worked to have it installed at the location McGurrin quipped should have one. With assistance from the City of Scranton and the

Lackawanna County Department of Parks and Recreation, concrete was poured and "The Sisters' Bench" was installed, Bantell said.

McGurrin, who never hesitated to communicate her love for others, would be

pleased, she said.

"If she saw a stranger sitting on a bench, she would sit down next to them," Bantell said.

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CHRISTOPHER DOLAN / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Jeanie Bantell of Hughestown speaks during a ceremony dedicating a park bench in honor of her late sister, Joann Conroy McGurrin, at McDade Park in Scranton on Friday.

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Biden to nominate Karam as region's new U.S. attorney

BY BORYS KRAWCZENIUK
STAFF WRITER

President Joe Biden wants longtime Scranton criminal defense attorney Gerard M. Karam to serve as the new U.S. attorney for the Middle District of Pennsylvania.

The White House announced Friday that Biden will nominate Karam, 60, a Dickson City resident, for the job, which temporary appointees have filled since former President Donald Trump left office in January 2021.

If confirmed by the Senate, Karam will replace interim U.S. Attorney John Gurganus, who assumed the role in November. Karam had been rumored the likely nominee since last summer. It is unclear why the nomination took so long.

In a statement, Karam described himself as "extremely honored" and thanked Biden and Sens. Bob Casey and Pat Toomey for their confidence in him.

"I look forward to the nomination process," Karam said.

Karam applied for U.S. attorney in 2009, but then President Barack Obama chose Wilkes-Barre native Peter J. Smith, whose office prosecuted many local corruption cases, including former Lackawanna County Commissioners Robert Cordaro and A.J. Munchak. Biden also nominated Jacqueline C. Romero as U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, which includes Philadelphia and surrounding southeastern counties. She is the first woman of color nominated to that post.

Biden nominated Cindy K. Chung as U.S. attorney for the state's Western District on Oct. 27. The Senate con-

firmed her Nov. 19.

In Northeast Pennsylvania, the Middle District includes Lackawanna, Luzerne, Monroe, Pike, Susquehanna, Wayne and Wyoming counties. The district's other 26 counties are Adams, Bradford, Cameron, Carbon, Centre, Clinton, Columbia, Cumberland, Dauphin, Franklin, Fulton, Huntingdon, Juniata, Lebanon, Lycoming, Mifflin, Montour, Northumberland, Perry, Potter, Schuylkill, Snyder, Sullivan, Tioga, Union and York, according to a U.S. Attorney's Office Court webpage.

Criminal defense attorney Ernie Preate Jr., a former state attorney general and former Lackawanna County district attorney, called Karam "well-grounded in the law" and someone with "a great temperament."

"He's an excellent litigator and he's a practical man," Preate said. "He knows how to solve problems and he'll be a good administrator over there."

In a joint statement, Casey and Toomey, who by tradition had to sign off on the nominations, praised Karam and Romero. Casey said both are highly qualified, independent leaders committed "to the safety of our communities and equal justice for all." Toomey cited Karam's experience and commitment to the law and Romero's "academic and legal background."

Karam is a longtime partner at the Scranton law firm of Mazzoni, Karam, Petorak and Valvano, where he has practiced since 1995. His practice focuses on complex civil and criminal litigation. Karam received his law degree from Loyola University School of Law in 1987, and his bachelor's degree from St. Joseph's University in 1984.

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