

A very special memorial located in a simple dirt path

By Jim Busek

It's just a simple dirt path.



And you really have to be looking for it.

There's no sign or other indication that a really nice hiking trail is even there.

It's located in Norwalk's Veteran's Memorial Lake Park at the east end of the Upper Reservoir. The gravel driveway goes past it. And so does the cement sidewalk. But if a walker takes a detour through the unmarked opening in

the trees, he or she is in for a special hike.

For one thing, it follows the water's edge for much of its length. So there are some very sweet views of the lake.

Also, there is little elevation change with occasional places to rest.



And I mentioned that it is a dirt path, right?

That's one of the main things Mike Patterson liked about it — that it was dirt.

Of course, he undoubtedly thought of it as soil, not simple dirt. Soil is full of minerals, nutrients and living organisms.

And Mike Patterson loved everything about soil. In particular, he loved sharing the wonders of soil with others.

"He had a Bachelor's in Science degree from the University of Wisconsin and became a soil scientist right out of college," Mike's wife Vicki explained. "He worked at Huron County Soil and Water.

"But his main interest was in educating children. And he loved going into the schools to teach them about soils."

Sound kind of boring? Having a guy come to your school to talk about soil?

Not when the guy coming out was Mike Patterson.

"He first of all made a Wolly Worm coloring book which the Soil and Water people put out and published," Vicki said. "Kids loved it. And that moved into him spearheading development of a six-foot-tall animatronic device. He wrote a song and script to go with it. They use it still on schools to educate children on soils."

Here is a downloadable PDF of the coloring book:



Jim Busek



ColoringFULL.pdf

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I called Greg Small at the Soil and Water office and asked if they still had the animatronic character.

"You're talking about SK Worm," Small laughed. "Yes we still have him. He was part of an \$84,000 project we committed to. He's 12 years old now. But I can't show him to you because he's in Indiana now for a program there."

"Mike just loved kids and doing things for them," Vicki told me.

Mike's son, Rick, agreed: "Soil wasn't just his work, it was everywhere in his life. He was always teaching us about soil and the impact it has in our lives."

"We took a trip to Florida," Vicki laughed. "And we had to stop in every state and get a baby food jar full of soil from that state."

"The boys always knew what crops were in every field. And all the trees — he did trees, too."

Son Chet nodded: "He would always be teaching us as we walked in the woods."

Mike Patterson's hikes on the special path along the shore of the reservoir began with his daughters, Angela, Michelle and Casie. "He started by taking the three girls on 'dates,'" Vicki explained. "He would bring them out

here and they would walk out on this path. He loved the privacy of it, away from all the people. As soon as boys were old enough he brought them back here, too."

"He was really into hiking," Rick added. "It was kind of slow-paced hiking, observing nature. And he would teach us things as we walked."

They did not see many other hikers. "But we would encounter people most days," Chet said. "Just a person here or there. It was never a busy area at all."

A few years ago, Mike Patterson got cancer.

In the spring of 2020, he was in remission. "And we were all rejoicing," Vicki recalls.

Then there were complications from medications being administered.

Michael D. Patterson died April 8, 2020 at Hospice of Central Ohio in Columbus.

He was 61 and passed just a few days short of Mike and Vicki's 32nd anniversary.

Vicki wanted a special, meaningful memorial for her late husband.

"Mike was cremated," she said. "And I just thought 'I want to do a bench.' I wanted something that was going to last a really long time. So I wanted a solid granite bench. And I wanted something really natural, because that was Mike. He was always into stuff that was really natural, really low key and not fancy."

She spent two years getting it right. COVID played a part in the delay. "I just wanted to wait long enough that most people would feel comfortable coming to a memorial.



Mike and Vicki Patterson

"The other thing is that I was fairly picky about what I wanted. The first place I worked with could not do some of the things I wanted," Vicki said. "Somebody said go to Franklin Monument (in Norwalk). So I started working with them. It was really a process to come up with what we wanted. For one thing it had to be big enough to fit all the words we wanted on it. It took a while to do this.

"My oldest daughter, Angela, really had all the things she wanted to be sure were said about her dad. She was pivotal in coming up with all the right words. She would say: 'we have to have this or that on there for sure.'"

In particular, they wanted to include Mike's passion for his family and his faith along with his love of nature and the children he educated about it.

About a month ago, the granite bench was completed.

"We were having a memorial on Mike's birthday, July 30, and I wanted to have it in place for that," Vicki explained.

They made it.







I asked how they chose the right spot for the bench.

"Originally we were going to have it back there where the trail splits," Vicki said, nodding down the path. "We actually cleared a spot for it. And luckily before they placed the bench a great big tree fell right on that spot."



"Then I walked along the path looking for another spot when I saw this one which is so much better. So I am really glad the tree fell because I like this spot: it's closer to the drive and there's a beautiful view."



"Yeah, it's really easy access but far enough down that you really feel like you are in the woods," Rick added.



Rick (left), Vicki and Chet Patterson

The day of my interview with Vicki, Rick and Chet, I arrived a little early and saw Emma Lindemberger sitting on the bench.



"Are you here for the Patterson interview?" I asked.

She looked puzzled. "No," she said. "I just came to do my Bible study. I try to come every day and go over a couple of passages."

It sounded like exactly the use the Patterson family had in mind for Mike's memorial.

Later, I asked Vicki about some of the wording on the bench.

One of the explanations was particularly sweet: "When our oldest grandchild was tiny Mike would see her and say 'Howdy, Kylie!' One day I was holding her, looking at pictures. When I pointed to Mike and asked 'who's this?' she said: 'Howdy!' All the other kids picked it up and he's been Howdy ever since."

As for the word "sacrificially," Vicki had to compose herself to explain: "My daughter reminded us: 'Dad would sacrifice anything he had or wanted to do, anything he needed to do, to be there for his family and his kids and you and the grandkids.' She said 'we have to have that word on there, mom.'"

And, in fact, it's there — engraved on a solid granite bench that will stand for generations on the rich organic soil beside the simple dirt path to memorialize the life of Michael D. Patterson.









Here is Mike's animatronic presentation: <https://eriebasinrcd.org/education/sk-worm/>.

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