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4,223 Central Park Benches With Stories to Tell

By N. R. KLEINFELD JUNE 17, 2016

In the park, there are 9,485 of them. You sit on them. To rest. Read a book. Sip coffee. Polish off a pulled-pork sandwich. Feed the pigeons. Wait for a friend, maybe a spy. Or it's a sluggish day when you have nothing to do, and this is a delicious place to accomplish absolutely nothing.

Or you can drift off and muse on the plaque affixed there, representing a story behind the bench. The Central Park bench. You aren't just sitting on wood. You are sitting on memories.

There is, for instance, a bench on the Mall that reads, "Two Red Foxes and a Pup."

What could that possibly mean?

It means this. Last year, Karen May wanted to adopt a bench as a surprise 65th-birthday gift for her husband, Tony, a retired investment banker. She inscribed it: "Tony, win, lose or break even, you always have me. Love Karen." When their two sons were young and he came home from his work on Wall Street, they would rush to greet him and ask, "Hey, Poppy, did you win, lose or break even?" And he would reply that he broke even, because that was what much of life was about, breaking even.

While Ms. May was so inclined, she figured she would adopt an adjoining bench for her children.

When her elder son, Theodore, proposed to his girlfriend, Lucinda, he wrote a brief children's book for her called "Two Red Foxes," because foxes were a recurring theme in her upbringing (as when a fox sped across the field when her father proposed to her mother). The foxes were stand-ins for Ms. May's son and his fiancée. And there was the fact that her younger son, Thornwell (Ms. May's maiden name), went by the nickname Pup.

So she adopted the benches and engraved them with memories. People will sit there and not know. But she knows.

Caitlin LaMorte was in the park one morning, the weather obligingly balmy though rain was possible later. As development manager for the Women's Committee of the Central Park Conservancy, which manages the park, she runs the Adopt-a-Bench program. It began in 1986, as a way to finance the maintenance of the benches and their immediate surroundings. (For those with different park preferences, orphan benches are up for adoption in parks elsewhere in New York and some other cities.)

If you can afford it, it's simple enough. Pay \$10,000 (it began at \$5,000) and you get to put a plaque on a bench, saying almost whatever you want (within limits of decorum: no cursing, no advertising), up to a suggested maximum of four lines of 30 characters each. And then it's there forever.

Ms. LaMorte consulted her tablet for the latest count: 4,223 of the benches adopted. About 250 go each year, she said. While plenty of benches remain unadopted, some areas are sold out. For instance, all the benches facing the lake. The ones lining the Mall. Those near the Great Lawn. Those along Wien Walk.

There are three styles of benches: the simple wood-and-concrete version; the World's Fair style, with its circular armrests, dating to 1939; and the Central Park settee, based on the benches used during the park's creation, circa 1858. There are also several dozen handmade rustic benches. With those, you have to fund a restoration of an entire park area and the cost starts at about \$500,000, not something to rush into.

Quite often, Ms. LaMorte said, benches are adopted to remember a relative or friend who has died. Or on occasion, a pet, generally a dog, though a few cats are honored as well. Something like 840 of the plaques have “memory” in their wording. There are some Sept. 11 remembrances.

Three years ago, a woman chose a bench in memory of herself for when her final date comes. It hasn't yet. The plaque, set to go, sits in one of Ms. LaMorte's desk drawers.

Increasingly, Ms. LaMorte said, “we have more plaques that are happy.” Graduations or birthdays or birth wishes or wedding gifts. A Japanese couple, when they returned to Japan after a lengthy stretch in the city, adopted a bench that reads: “We leave our hearts in New York after 23 years of our adventure here.”

There are a lot of benches in the playground areas commemorating births. One man adopted five benches, one for each of his grandchildren, who received them on their 16th birthdays.

Last year, Victor Schiller required a birthday present for his wife, Nancy. She told him, emphatically, no jewelry, thereby ruling out his go-to category.

He thought and thought, and then he had it. Give her one of the benches.

They didn't even live in New York. They lived in Charlottesville, Va., but they had bought a place in Manhattan that they inhabited roughly a week each month. They think Central Park is truly wonderful. Mr. Schiller, 59, is retired from creating technology start-ups. Ms. Schiller, 57, is retired from investment work focused on Bulgaria.

He gave her the bench, and was she happy. He waited on the inscription so she could have a say. They conferred and agreed on: “We Would Make the Same Mistake All Over Again! Vic & Nancy Schiller. Still Best Friends.”

They did not reveal what the mistake was. Understandably, their three mystified children asked them, but lips sealed. Each has guessed, Umm, did you mean me? Well, of course not. No!

Was it waiting so long — 11 years — to have children? Wrong.

How about buying the apartment in New York? Incorrect, not even close.

So they don't know.

That's what reporters are for. To crack open mysteries, shine flashlights into dusty corners. Sometimes that's very hard. Other times, less so. In this case, the Schillers were ready to give it up. It was possible to find out in the most ordinary way — by asking them.

The two met when she was 20 and he was 22. They got engaged a year later. Mr. Schiller called his mother to break the good news. His mother dropped the phone. When she calmed herself enough to pick it up, she told him, "You're making a big mistake!"

Ms. Schiller called her mother. Her mother said, "What are you thinking?"

Those withering cautions, of course, are what mothers are legally required to say. And, of course, 20-somethings are under well-established protocol to ignore them.

Which is what the Schillers did. Went ahead and got married and never looked back.

Lou Young is a rugged, affable man of 59, with a bald head and a well-behaved beard. For 33 years, he has worked for the parks department, almost all of that time immersed in Central Park. He gives his title as Bench Guy. He affixes the plaques to the benches. A few at the beginning were handled by others, but since then they've been all his doing.

In the stinging sun the other day, he was out getting it done on a bench in the Ramble. As usual, the park was bubbling with activity. Wordlessly and with focused attention, he lined up a spot in the direct center, meticulously routed out a hole, then screwed in the plaque. Four screws. In less than 10 minutes, he was done. The inscription read: "You are the image of the rose shining within me like the flame within a lamp ...," a line modified from "The Little Prince."

Mr. Young paints the benches too, spiffs them up, fixes them when weather chews them up.

He came to New York from Birmingham, Ala., after the plant he worked in, making slats for train boxcars, shut down. Not long after he got to New York, he was riding in an elevator and noticed that it passed the 12th floor and then went to 14. No 13th floor. The unlucky thing.

Now wait a minute, Mr. Young thought, I was born on the 13th. On a Friday no less. To him, it's a lucky number. So he went to a dentist and had a front tooth plated with gold and 13 engraved on it. He likes to play the numbers. Every day for 25 years, he has played 1313 at \$5 a pop. Never hit, but he keeps at it.

How did he like his work? "I just love the park," he said. "Best place to be. Since I'm from the South, it reminds me of home."

Once he put on a plaque that a man had ordered to propose to the woman he was dating. The man must have missed some important signals. Her answer was a flat no. Benches aren't returnable. Lou Young had to remove the failed plaque and replace it with one bearing nonmatrimonial expectations. (You can always change your plaque, but that's another \$1,000.)

One day about 10 years ago the Bench Guy was out in earnest with newly arrived plaques. He had one to do at the southwest corner of the Great Lawn. He screwed it on, then took a look and saw it said Louis Young. He thought, "Interesting, this guy has the same name as me."

Turned out, one of the recurrent donors to the park, who had adopted 18 benches and given them as gifts, had gotten to know and admire Lou Young from watching him do his bench work. So she gave him a bench.

The plaque reads: "LOUIS YOUNG FOR HIS CARE AND DEDICATION TO CENTRAL PARK SINCE 1985."

It's not cheap to adopt a bench; you could buy a decent used car for the cost. But there is fund-raising. Nicole Vest battled leukemia for two and a half years before she died in February 2015. She was 34. Her family and friends debated what to do to

honor her memory. She was cremated, and there was no place to go and pay respects. Someone suggested a bench, and everyone liked that idea.

They set up an appeal on a fund-raising website. Family and friends chipped in, as did others, people who had never met Ms. Vest but knew one of her friends or relatives. The effort kicked off on March 10 of last year. It attained its goal by April 1. About 90 people donated, some giving as little as \$20. They adopted a bench just north of the sailboat pond.

What to put on it? They wanted something original. "I didn't want something that was used all the time, like beloved sister and daughter," said Michelle Lapworth, Ms. Vest's sister.

Ms. Vest loved butterflies. She had a butterfly tattoo on her ankle, wore a butterfly necklace. Her best friend found a quotation from Hans Christian Andersen, and that met with approval. "'Just living is not enough,' said the butterfly. 'One must have sunshine, freedom, and a little flower.' In Memory of Nicole E. Vest 1981-2015."

Another story, pet included. When Chris Branca died much too young in an accident at 33 last April, his family wanted to remember him with a bench. They also wanted to remember his dog.

Buddha, a bulldog, had died a year earlier. Mr. Branca delighted in going to the park with Buddha. He lived further downtown. He drove there with Buddha. He was particularly fond of the Sheep Meadow.

Dogs are prohibited from the grass there. Nonetheless, that expanse beguiled Mr. Branca. Weekend after weekend, he went there with Buddha. "He would get a ticket all the time and just pay it," said Lindsey Branca, his sister. "That was his personality. He was a little bit defiant."

So, the family, which runs a real estate company, adopted adjoining benches, one for Mr. Branca and one for Buddha.

Mr. Branca was an abiding fan of Maurice Sendak's "Where the Wild Things Are." With great frequency, he wore a Wild Things T-shirt. His best friend suggested

a Wild Things line that was adapted for the inscription: "For Chris Branca. In all of us there is Fear, Hope and Adventure. In all of us there is a Wild Thing."

The adjoining bench bears the plaque: "For Buddha Branca Chris's Bulldog forever by his side."

A memorial service was held at the benches. Some 80 people attended. Subsequently, friends have visited the benches, taken pictures, sent them on to the family.

A few weeks ago, his mother went to check on the benches and two of his childhood friends were sitting on them, chatting away. She sat down, slipped into the conversation. Another time, she looked in on the benches and a high school friend of Mr. Branca's was resting there. It turned out that he was in town visiting. He lives in Puerto Rico.

Benches. Benches. Benches. They can serve many purposes. He came to New York from Bogotá, Colombia. She arrived from St. Petersburg, Fla. They met in March 2014, at a friend's birthday party. Chrissy Crawford made such an impression on Enrique Corredor that on the way home in a cab, he texted her to ask her out. Things went excellently from then on.

As a boy he used to play in the park, dissolving into the Ramble. For years, he had had a dream that when he proposed to a woman, he would do it with one of the benches whose inscriptions he read. Right where he used to play. He just needed the woman.

Now he was set.

What to put on it? He trawled the internet, looking up love poems, romantic sayings. "I was surprised, but some of the best love lines were in letters written by Henry Kissinger," he said.

Yes, of course.

Nonetheless, he kept going. He came across something from "Gone With the Wind," Rhett Butler proposing to Scarlett O'Hara: "Say you're going to marry me.

Say yes. Say yes.” Ms. Crawford was from the South. That would do it. He altered it somewhat and made the plaque: “My dearest Chrissy. Say you will marry me. With all my love and promise. Enrique. June 2015.”

He picked a day for the surprise. He had gotten the engagement ring of Ms. Crawford’s grandmother that he was going to use. But it rained. He had to push it back. He didn’t know, but the new date was the wedding anniversary of her grandmother.

He suggested they run in the park. Ms. Crawford made it clear they had to leave by a certain time, for she had a business meeting. She has an online art gallery. He is an investment banker.

They ran. “He kept stalling and wanting to walk around and get coffee, explore,” she remembered. “I was so angry with him by the time we got to the bench.”

He told her, “Hey, Chrissy, look at that bench.” The anger dissipated. He dropped to his knee. She said yes.

It was an expensive way to propose, considering it can be done free, but he didn’t see it that way. “Well, I didn’t have to pay for an engagement ring, so I get off on that,” he said. “But I looked on it as a creating an heirloom. Leaving our mark on the city.”

Something like 43 million people visit the park every year. Once a month or so, the couple will swing by, sit on the bench, their bench, and amid the park’s placidity, contentedly gaze at the humanity filing past, and feel good.

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There are 9,485 benches in the park. Almost half of them are more than simply places to sit. Credit Photographs by Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times and Yana Paskova for The New York Times



May family members in Central Park, from left: Karen, Tony, Thornwell, Theodore and Theodore's wife, Lucinda. Credit Yana Paskova for The New York Times Photo