

The History of the Plantsville Congregational U.C.C. Memorial Garden  
and the Memorial Garden Board

Respectfully submitted by Wendy A. Fortin (April 2021)

The inception of the Plantsville Congregational U.C.C. Memorial Garden occurred during the Spring/Summer 1996 after the untimely death of Julie Anne Fortin, who was the almost 14 years old daughter of church members, Glenn and Wendy Fortin. The Junior High School Sunday school class, of which Julie was a participant, wanted to plant a pink, weeping cherry tree in her memory. Under the leadership of their Sunday school teacher, Virginia (Ginny) Bicknell, the weeping cherry tree was purchased and planted in its current location within the Memorial Garden. During 1996-1997, Wendy Fortin created a kidney-shaped flower bed surrounding the weeping cherry tree to accommodate the perennial flowers purchased by the extended Fortin family. During the next three years, Ginny Bicknell, who was a member of the Garden Committee (a former sub-set of the Board of Trustees), expressed great interest in creating a Church Memorial Garden within the area where the initial weeping cherry tree was planted. With the support of other Garden Committee members, an original plan to design, establish, and oversee a permanent, self-supporting Memorial Garden on church property was proposed to church members during the Fall of 1999. We soon realized that the best means to achieve our vision, was to create/form a separate Memorial Garden Board which follows the policies and by-laws of the church. The main positions on the Board include a Chairperson(s), Treasurer, Secretary, and Council Representative. Other positions may include a Design Chairperson, Fundraising Committee, Perpetual Care Committee, and Members at Large (helpers). By the spring of 2001, the Memorial Garden Board was officially established. As the Board of Trustees' workload increased, the Memorial Garden Board (which included many of the Trustees' "Garden Committee" helpers), decided to take on the Garden Committees' responsibilities under the auspices of the Memorial Garden Board. Thus, the Memorial Garden Board was created for the purpose of managing and maintaining the Memorial Garden as well as the flower garden areas surrounding the church property.

After the death of Ginny Bicknell's husband in late August 2000, the Bicknell family purchased and planted a white weeping cherry tree to mirror the pink, weeping cherry tree. The Bicknell family also bought flowers/bushes with a red, white, and blue color scheme to be planted within a kidney shaped garden around their white cherry tree. The flower colors were to reference Chris' military service. This was the beginning of the Memorial Garden design plan.

In February 2001, Ginny Bicknell and Wendy Fortin decided that it would be nice to purchase two metal benches to be placed in front of each kidney-shaped garden so that persons visiting the Memorial Garden could have a place to reflect and enjoy the flowers. The Fortin family paid for the "Julie" bench and plaque, and the Bicknell family paid for the "Chris B." bench and plaque. Former member, Mark Naylor volunteered to pour the concrete slabs on which the benches would be placed. The two benches were installed in late Spring 2001.

In order to create our Memorial Garden, we needed funds, so we opened a Memorial Garden Board checking account in June 2001. When the Memorial Garden Board voted to create an octagon-shaped annual flower bed with a birdbath at the center as a focal point, it was determined that we needed a viable way to raise funds. During the early Fall 2001, the Board made a decision to construct a brick walkway around the octagon with the proviso that we could sell and install engraved memorial bricks every other year at a cost of \$50 per brick. Glenn Fortin constructed a wooden octagon-shaped template for installing the bricks. Jon (Butch) Mattson quarterbacked the project by providing the tools, knowledge, and installation skills. The Memorial Board purchased the needed, plain place-holder bricks, and Butch, Glenn, and Wendy Fortin installed the octagon brick walkway. In October 2001, the 76 engraved memorial bricks arrived just in time for installation before the cooler weather arrived.

The Memorial Garden's next upgrade was the installation of the underground watering system in 2003. The idea to install an underground watering system was proposed by Butch Mattson who got tired of watching Wendy Fortin haul three lengths of industrial hose from the parsonage water spigot to the Memorial Garden site every time the flowers needed a drink. His comment was, "I can't stand the thought of you doing this when you're 80 years old!" With Butch's knowledge of an available church waterline connection to the left of the garage, he borrowed the proper equipment from his place of employment and contacted Marcel Duprey and John Forster to help install an underground waterline up to the Memorial Garden site. The Memorial Garden Board is indebted to these three men for volunteering their time and skills to bring this 'easy water access' to fruition.

During 2004, the Memorial Garden Board felt there was a need to establish a physical perimeter around the Memorial Garden due to an overabundance of "doggie deposits" and litter left by people hanging out on the benches. We first had to get a variance approval from Southington's Zoning Board of Appeals due to the fact that our fence would be higher than their regulation height requirement of four feet or less. Once our variance was approved, the Memorial Garden Board voted to purchase a wrought iron fence in keeping with the 1860s style of fencing to coincide with our 1860's historically registered church. We held a fundraiser to purchase the fence, and we had a stone marker erected behind the octagon garden which lists all the members who contributed to the Fence Fundraiser. Bill Hammick and his son were instrumental in getting this stone and plaque made and installed. The entry gate of our fence was designed and purchased by Ginny Bicknell in memory of her husband (Chris) who was a high school industrial arts teacher with a passion for metallurgy.

Over the years, the Memorial Garden Board has tried to remain flexible and sensitive in meeting the needs of our parishioners who are bereft after losing a special loved one.

Christopher's Corner was established in 2005 after the untimely death of Pastor and Mrs. Koenig's younger son. His Corner is located within the Memorial Garden at the corner of Church St. and Cowles Ave. Though some of the original plantings had to be transplanted

elsewhere due to crowding issues, Chris' Corner currently houses a pink azalea bush and a red azalea bush donated by Pastor Koenig's sisters. Greg LaForge was able to purchase a stone with the "Chris' Corner" inscription on it. Wendy Fortin purchased the Chinese Dogwood tree in memory of Chris Koenig. It is located just to the right of Chris' Corner on the Cowles Ave. side.

After the death of Josh Cunliffe in December 2009, the Cunliffe family established "Josh's Corner" which is located within the Memorial Garden on the Church St. side. The Cunliffe family planted an upright evergreen bush, a few perennials, and erected a stone plaque in their son's memory.

The hydrangea bush, ground phlox, and columbine flower (Ruth Stone's favorite flower), located within the Memorial Garden at the corner on the Cowles Ave. side, was established in memory of Corey Lanning's parents, Ruth and Russell Stone. The original request was to have a Whamister broom bush for the Stone's corner garden, but neither of the two Whamister broom bushes that we bought and planted survived there, so we opted for the hydrangea instead. On the other hand, the Whamister broom bush (Elaine Lathrop's favorite bush) located within the Memorial Garden corner nearest to the field, has survived and is in memory of Elaine Lathrop (Laurie Smedberg's mother).

The Wisteria vine, located in front of one of the archways on Church St., is in memory of Sue Smayda's sister, Gail.

The hydrangea bush, in front of the other archway, was transplanted from the Chris Bicknell garden in order to give it space to grow, receive more sunlight, and produce flowers.

In 2017, the Memorial Garden Board paid to add a memorial brick walkway from the octagon garden to the fence gate in order to create more spaces to place memorial bricks.

The most recent addition to the Memorial Garden is the stone bench and urns that were installed in 2018 in memory of our beloved church member, Heather Lindsay Mosher. Fred and Linda Lindsay desperately wanted a stone bench to honor their daughter's life, but were denied their request at the cemetery where Heather's ashes are buried. They broached the subject to the Memorial Garden Board, and we voted to grant their wish as long as they paid for the bench and the installation costs. Lou Graham, Tony Edge, and Liz Douglas had the arduous task of pouring a slab where the stone bench would eventually reside. Wendy Fortin planted purple ajuga, purple ground phlox, and two lavender plants around the sides and back of the slab. Katie Hanlon added a few dwarf purple nepeta for summer blooms. (purple was Heather's favorite color).

Our latest request is to take Barb MacKay shopping for a birdbath (in memory of Malcolm "Mack"), which we will place at the center of the linear flower bed along the parking lot side.

The Memorial Garden Board does its best to maintain all of the gardens. We have challenges with nature (insects, climate change, plants dying, our aging bodies with aches and pains, etc.), but we do our best to make our church property a beautiful place.

The Memorial Garden Board is a self-sustaining Board. We hold Memorial Brick fundraisers every other year. We hold a bake sale on the years that we don't have a brick fundraiser. In a typical year, we hold a pansy sale in late March or early April. During the early years, we asked for monetary donations so that we could purchase the annual flowers for the octagon garden. In the early years, we also held pre-order summer plant sales, but those sales were more work for less profit, so we switched to bake sales which requires less work with more profit.

Although the Memorial Garden Board doesn't encourage people to bring their pets into the Memorial Garden (there's a dog park in Town for that), anybody is welcome to enter and enjoy the sanctity and beauty of the gardens. We are currently a small Board with only 5 active members (the original Memorial Garden Board consisted of 8-9 members), so we do ask that visitors respect our gardens and hard work. Feel free to visit anytime and enjoy the fruits of our labor!