

AFTER 100 YEARS, A NEW PLACE TO REST

June 06, 2017 at 4:00 pm | By [Hillary Gavan \(mailto:hgavan@beloitdailynews.com\)](mailto:hgavan@beloitdailynews.com)



Clint Wolf/Beloit Daily News Rod Gottfredsen of Austin's Barbershop sits on a new bench that community members donated to him. Gottfredsen had invited customers and friends to his business Monday to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the barber shop.

BELOIT - They called themselves the Austin Barbershop Bench Bandits. And they had a big surprise in store for Austin's Barbershop owner Rod Gottfredsen Monday afternoon.

As he gathered at the business located at 316 State St., celebrating the 100th anniversary open house of the shop, the bandits quickly set up his new bench outside. When they lured him outside for a picture, he discovered the special gift bestowed upon him.

The bench, valued at \$1,000, was a gift from 40 enthusiastic donors who wanted to pay homage to the business's special place in Beloit's heart. Gottfredsen was also presented with a certificate signed by everyone who contributed toward purchasing the bench.

Beloit City Councilor and neighboring business Northwoods Premium Confections customer service person Mark Preuschl said the surprise came off without a hitch.

"The barbershop is an encapsulation of small town life, and doing something like this is the same thing. It's a Beloit thing. The city is not so big it can't do something like this," Preuschl said.

He and Northwoods Premium Confections co-owner Teala Lamoreux decided to replace Gottfredsen's old bench with a new one. In an interview Monday, Preuschl said the old bench was getting a bit faded and wobbly.

After obtaining a catalogue from Downtown Beloit Association (DBA) Executive Shauna El-Amin, a five-foot-long bench was selected.

"It's a wonderful bench," Preuschl said. "It will last 100 years easily, and it weighs a ton."

The Austin's Barbershop Bench Bandits group was launched on Facebook so everyone could covertly discuss the plan. Gottfredsen's wife was also included so she could help keep her husband from buying his own new bench.

"We had so many contributions we had to tell people to not give so much. The donations averaged \$25 per person. We had to start turning people away," Preuschl said.

He said people were so generous because Austin's Barbershop is fixture of downtown Beloit.

"It's the place you go if you need to know something. If it's worth knowing, Rod knows it. It has all that Beloit history, and Rod is such a positive part of the downtown experience," Preuschl said.

The bench was assembled last weekend and was in the back of the Scott and Teala Lamoreaux's van. The van had to be backed up to Upperclass Awards so a plaque could be attached to it.

"We backed up to the building so Melissa and her husband could put the plaque on, and no one could see us doing it," Preuschl said.

On Monday, the plan was for the bandits to swap out the benches while Preuschl and Rep. Mark Spreitzer, D-Beloit, read city and state proclamations in light of the anniversary.

Austin's Barber Shop, 316 State St., was established in 1917 by George Wheeler. At that time it was located in the Beloit Hotel. Later it moved to East Grand Avenue and then to State Street.

Matthew Austin began working at the shop in 1925. In 1946, he and Howard Schleicher took over for George Wheeler. Austin then gave the shop to Gottfredsen in 1983. Gottfredsen had other employees over the years, but has worked alone since 1994.

"I'm surprised they kept this secret. I'm supposed to know everything that's going on," Gottfredsen said. "I'm overwhelmed. This community has been so good to me. I'm speechless."