

Bush's giant thank-you note to Wilson teacher

President's visit, gift in 1989 were memorable

On the day America officially mourned its 41st president, an outsized slice of George H.W. Bush's legacy was resurrected in the main hallway of Wilson Magnet High School in Rochester.

There, William Davis, the school's head custodian, cleared out a glass display case of chess club trophies to make room for a school heirloom that had been stored in the basement for years.

The heirloom was a massive thankyou note the president wrote in chalk on a slab of blackboard during a visit to the



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school on May 18, 1989. It read: "To Mrs. Kathy Bowersox, Thanks for the hospitality of your room. George Bush 5-18-89."

"We thought it would be nice to have that out on display," said Richard Fischpera, the assistant principal, who called the note coupled with the passing of the president a "teachable moment." "Just for kids to see how history was here in this building, that's a cool thing."

Bush was one of the modern era's great letter writers, whose handwritten thank-you notes were a hallmark of his presidency. He used them to foster relations with world leaders, build bridges with enemies and embody the "kinder, gentler nation" he called for in his inaugural address.

As Sarah L. Kaufman wrote in *The Washington Post* upon the president's death, "Nothing was too small, too personal or too easily overlooked to merit a handwritten thank-you letter from George H.W. Bush."

That would include, it seems, the inconvenience of the Secret Service commandeering Room 128 at Wilson as a staging area for the president.

"They happened to use my classroom because it was the closest to the door that he would be using to get in the building," recalled Kathleen Bowersox, 76, a retired special education teacher who now lives in Florida.

Not long after, Joe Willard of the Pittsford Picture Framing Co. mounted a frame filled with tempered glass to the blackboard over the note.

There it stood in Room 128, through the presidencies of Bill Clinton and Bush's son, George W. Bush, until at some point — no one at the school could recall when precisely — whiteboards were installed in all the classrooms.

What to do then? Cut the blackboard, of course. But the remnant, which was even larger than the note itself, was so unwieldy that there was no appropriate place to display it.

So, what is arguably the biggest thank-you note President George H.W. Bush ever wrote ended up in the school basement. Until Wednesday, that is, when his funeral moved the school to remind students how the president once walked the very same halls.

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Richard Fischpera, assistant principal, and William Davis, head custodian, move a section of chalkboard with a note written on it from former President George H.W. Bush at Wilson Magnet High School. The note was preserved under glass and then the chalkboard was cut off the wall when white boards

Bush was in town to speak at the Eastman Kodak Co. and salute something called the Rochester Brain Power Program, which sought to connect public schools with the private sector as a means of improving education.

It was a three-hour tour, and his first stop was at Wilson, where he observed a robotics demonstration and addressed cheering students in the gymnasium, telling them they were the future.

“They were very respectful,” Melanie Williams, a school counselor who was at Wilson then, said of the students.

Williams recalled how snipers were positioned on the roof, dogs sniffed out the school for danger, and the first-floor windows were covered with black paper to conceal the president’s movement.

Before his appearance in the gymnasium, though, Bush made himself at home in Room 128, which was transformed into a makeshift Oval Office.

“The red telephone, the famous red telephone, was in there. All the cords were strung up and hanging outside the window,” Bowersox said. “When they left and I opened the door, I just looked at the board said, ‘Oh my goodness, that’s quite an autograph.’ ” At nearly 4 feet by 2 feet, the note is perhaps the largest thank-you note Bush ever wrote.

“He couldn’t have taken a piece of paper and left it on the desk,” Bowersox joked. “He had to leave it on the blackboard.”

No sooner had the president and his motorcade left Genesee Street than the conversation in the building turned to how to preserve his note.

“The first thing was to how to keep the kids’ hands off it,” Bowersox recalled. “No small feat.”

There was talk of spraying it with some kind of solvent, but no one wanted to chance dissolving the chalk. Covering it with plexiglass was an option, but there was concern static electricity might extract the chalk. Bowersox ended up covering the letter with a sheet of paper for the remainder of the semester.

The quandary of what to do with the president’s note so intrigued Bowersox’s mother, Catherine Lillich, that she wrote first lady Barbara Bush to tell her about it. True to form, the first lady wrote back in a letter dated Aug. 9, 1989.

were installed in the school, and the historic note was put into storage. The school has resurrected the chalkboard to show current students. MAX SCHULTE / ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

President George H.W. Bush left what might be the largest thank-you note he ever wrote to Wilson Magnet High School teacher Kathleen Bowersox in 1989. BURR LEWIS, STAFF

Former President George H.W. Bush signed his name to a thank-you note he wrote in chalk at Wilson Magnet High School when he visited in 1989. MAX SCHULTE / ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

President George H.W. Bush addresses students at Wilson Magnet High School on May 18, 1989. FILE PHOTO

“The first thing was to how to keep the kids’ hands off it. No small feat.”

Kathy Bowersox

Wilson Magnet teacher, about preserving George H.W. Bush’s blackboard note

“I loved your letter about George and ‘The Great Message Caper.’ Thanks so much for taking the time to share the fun,” the first lady wrote on White House letterhead. “George joins me in sending our very best wishes to you and your family. Warmly, Barbara Bush.”