

Vo-Tech Students Give Time, Talents

By **SUZETTE F. STALKER**
Specially Written for Our Town

Long after they have parted company to explore new horizons and diverse career paths, a group of 20 students from the Union County Vocational-Technical Schools (UCVTS) in Scotch Plains will share a memory in the form of a Victorian-style gazebo they built on the township's Village Green.

The young craftspeople, representing 11 Union County communities, constructed the natural wood gazebo at the corner of Park Avenue and Front Street in the heart of the downtown as a class project this spring. It was dedicated by Scotch Plains Mayor Joan Papen during the Scotch Plains Day/StreetFest '98 celebration in the Towne Center on October 3.

Standing 13 feet high and measuring 16 feet in diameter, the gazebo also served as a platform for the Civic Awards Ceremony that day, during which distinguished citizens, retirees and deceased township employees and volunteers were recognized by elected officials.

The idea for a gazebo in the downtown was conceived by Ray Pardon, President of the Scotch Plains Business and Professional Association and the owner of Nuts N' Plenty on Park Avenue.

He and Councilman Martin Marks head the township's Downtown Task Force, which was formed this year as the successor to the Downtown Development Committee.

According to Arthur Grisi, another member of the Task Force, the gazebo was one of several initiatives developed by the group as part of a long-range plan to breathe new life into the township's business district.

The mission of the task force is to find ways of invigorating the downtown by attracting more patrons to the area.

Like other local shopping districts, Scotch Plains faces commercial competition from malls and larger retailers along nearby Route No. 22. It is hoped that the gazebo,

along with such other amenities as benches, banners and welcoming signs, will infuse the business district with a "Hometown Feeling" and give the area an economic boost.

Task Force members approached Skip Knittel of Lakewood, senior construction technology instructor at UCVTS, around the end of March about having students there construct the gazebo in time for the township's anticipated Memorial Day celebration. Mr. Knittel and fellow instructor Paul Milea of Somerville readily agreed to take on the project, after which the Task Force, with the endorsement of the Township Council, selected a design.

The students, a mix of high school juniors and seniors as well as adult tuition participants, executed sketches of how the Village Green gazebo would look at various stages of construction, in order to "visualize better" the materials needed for the project, according to Mr. Knittel.

Construction materials were donated by the Messercola Brothers Building Company of Westfield, with additional materials supplied by Ralph Checchio, Inc. of Scotch Plains. The Eastern Marble & Granite Supply Company of Scotch Plains donated the plaque honoring those who contributed to the project, which is mounted on a base next to the gazebo and was unveiled during the Scotch Plains Day dedication. Crane services for the project were provided by Espo's Tree Service of Scotch Plains.

Inscribed on the plaque is a poem, written by Scotch Plains resident Joseph Donatelli, Jr., which reflects the township's joining of its past and present to shape the future: "From the very beginning, the beautiful old buildings and colonial history...to the present time, unique and modern concepts. A true small town lives on!"

According to Mr. Knittel, the floor system and roof frame of the structure were put together at the vo-tech school's Raritan Road campus, then trans-



TEAM EFFORT...Students from the Union County Vocational-Technical Schools in Scotch Plains, pictured last spring, construct the Victorian-style gazebo on the Village Green as a class project. Township officials and downtown merchants hope the new landmark, along with distinctive benches, banners and signs, will enhance the ambiance of the business district.

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