

Bench

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has started taking orders for personalized benches. And after she sent a check for \$1,000, the family could all go out to a bench across the Boardwalk from Fralinger's and see this dedication to Joe and Florence League:

"Here is where it all began."

The Leagues' bench is still one of just a handful on Atlantic City's Boardwalk, but in other local towns that have similar programs, the main problem has been that too many people wanted benches

for them all to fit.

Carol Longo, the coordinator of Ocean City's program, says the Boardwalk has more than 300 benches with plaques on them, and she had to stop taking orders at least two years ago. Before that, she added, the city had a waiting list at least 300 names long — and the interest was as hot when the benches cost \$650 apiece as it was when they started at \$400.

"The demand for dedicated benches on the Boardwalk is just unbelievable," she said.

Jon Bitzer, the landscaping manager for the Atlantic City SID, believes the idea has started slowly in the city because most people don't know about

it yet. And the official interest in it is the same as in the other towns that have sold dedicated benches: The fee a buyer pays to put a plaque on gives the city a brand-new bench on its Boardwalk, at no cost to taxpayers.

Bitzer said that even at \$1,000 apiece, his agency covers only its own costs in putting out the new benches. The ones the city uses have wrought-iron frames and cost about \$700 apiece unassembled, and by the time workers put them together and the SID gets the 4-by-12-inch plaques engraved, "The thousand dollars is a wash," he said. "There's no profit in it at all."

Mayor Lorenzo Langford said he's happy to see new benches go out on the Boardwalk without the city having to foot the bill. "But I don't know that the benches we have are all that bad," he added.

Ventnor was out to replace its aging benches a few years ago when the city accepted a suggestion to offer personalized ones at \$500 each, and now the mayor's office says the town has more than 200 new benches on its Boardwalk, pavilions and fishing pier. The town could also have hundreds more, too, but safety officials worried about an unbroken line of benches along one railing making the Boardwalk too narrow, especially on crowded summer weekends.

In Atlantic City, the SID says the city now has about 280 benches on its 4-plus-mile-long Boardwalk, and the agency will cap the number of new, personalized ones at 200, according to its Web site.

Three of Atlantic City's first plaque-bearing benches are in the last block of the Boardwalk before the city reaches Ventnor, and two of them are memorials to city natives John O'Neill and Victor Saracini, who were killed in the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. But Debbie and Sidney Nieburg of Lansdale, Pa., and Margate picked a third bench, dedicated to the memory of Ruthann K. Saul, as their spot to sit on a beautiful afternoon last week.

They didn't know Saul, but since they discovered her



Staff photo by Scott E. Stetzer

Joe and Florence League pass by the Atlantic City bench dedicated to them during their regular bike rides.

bench, Sidney said, "We were just talking about that — we'd like to know about her."

Most Boardwalk benches do turn out to be memorials, designed to keep alive the names and memories of people who have died. But Joe and Florence League say they've learned the joy of seeing their bench.

The Leagues, who live now in Egg Harbor Township, ride past the spot three days a week, winter and summer, on their regular 20-mile rides from the tip of Longport to Absecon Inlet in Atlantic City and back again.

"What a wonderful, wonderful gift. ... And I do go over sometimes and park my butt on it, if nobody's sitting on it," 75-year-old Joe League says with a laugh. But what he likes even better is hearing from people he knows who find his

special bench at that special spot in his family's history.

"(An old friend) sent me a card and said, 'Joe, I sat on your bench,'" he adds. "Then she said, 'I didn't know you had a bench! Everyone else who has a bench is dead.'"

Of course, nothing says that every Boardwalk bench has to be a memorial. But several towns' experience says that every available bench will sell out to somebody who has somebody to remember.

(For information on Boardwalk benches in Atlantic City, call the Special Improvement District at (609) 348-8338.)

Strike

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With all the determination of a striking Local 54 member, 18-year-old Shivali Gandotra proudly carried a "Unite!" sign and explained why she was on the Boardwalk on Sunday afternoon.

"To support her," Gandotra said of her mother, Shushma, a Tropicana employee. Gandotra said she supported her mother's cause, but added that as the strike drags into a second week, getting by is getting harder.

"If (the strike) goes on long, we can't live," Gandotra said.

Several of the union members interviewed Sunday did not speak English. Strike captain Mirna Preciado translated.

Yasmin Galarza, a room attendant at Tropicana for the past six years, brought her five children, Ashley, Yaraisma, Raymond, Jakeline and Suleyka, to show them what she is fighting for, she said through Preciado.

"A good contract," said Galarza, 31.

Emili Gutierrez brought her two children, Emicelis, 9, and Celimar, 18 months, to the event.

Through Preciado, Gutierrez said she explained the reason for the strike to her daughter Emicelis.

"I told her that ... I'm doing it for her, for a better future ... and for bread for every day," Gutierrez said.

Local 54 has been without a contract since Sept. 15 and opted to strike seven of 12 casino properties after a union-imposed deadline expired Oct. 1.

On Friday, the seven struck casinos announced they had formed a unified group to negotiate with Local 54. No talks with the group have been scheduled.

Susan Lotzen, a spokeswoman for Harrah's and Showboat, said no new progress has been made in negotiations. Messages left with a spokeswoman for Tropicana and a spokesman for Bally's and Caesars were not returned Sunday afternoon.

Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa signed a contract last year, and Sands Atlantic City took a "me-too" option that let it sign the first approved contract.

Trump Hotels & Casino Resorts, which operates the three Trump-named casinos, signed a three-year deal hours before the strike deadline.

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