

SIUE Dogwood Trees: A Budding History of Prestige

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EDWARDSVILLE - The thick, vibrant foliage on **Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's** 2,660-acre campus is a natural beauty in which visitors and the campus community delight.

Beginning in 1962 and spanning well into the 1970s, SIUE horticultural staff worked tirelessly to create a meticulously planned landscaping design that allowed for campus growth and emphasized the natural aesthetics of the campus environment. The landscaping was a booming success, and current University staff remain committed to maintaining the beauty of campus.

The June 1978 issue of the University's alumni publication, the *Alumnus*, describes photographers, artists, horticultural clubs and private collectors coming to campus to marvel at the rare and unusual trees. Seeds and cuttings from the trees were donated to many private museums, colleges, high schools, arboretums and horticultural organizations, according to the alumni publication which was provided by Stephen Kerber, PhD, SIUE archivist and special collections librarian.

While thousands of plant species can be identified throughout the wooded campus, perhaps most impressive are the brightly colored blooms of the dogwood trees. The flowering trees have become an iconic representation of spring.

For alumnus **Bonnie L. (Gibson) Risby**, who grew up on a wooded acreage in Dupu, Ill., the dogwoods represent much more – they represent friendship and family.

In 1966, Bonnie, then 18, first set foot on SIUE's new campus, two days after her high school graduation. Boasting only two buildings, the SIUE campus was as poised for growth as Bonnie. Much like seedlings, Bonnie and the SIUE campus would set out on an incredible journey of growth and adventure.

As a student worker in the SIUE Office of Financial Aid, Bonnie met **Edward Hume**, SIUE horticulturist and landscape gardener at the time. In conversation, Bonnie noticed that Hume expressed great passion for horticulture and forestry – a subject which her father, **Jack Gibson**, thoroughly enjoyed, as well. Hume explained that the campus was very windy due to breezes from the Mississippi River and lack of tree coverage.

Bonnie invited Hume to meet her father and visit her St. Clair County home, where the two men walked the woods and had in-depth conversations about how to bring natural beauty to the SIUE campus. “While they came from very different cultural backgrounds, my father and Mr. Hume developed a deep friendship through their mutual love for plant life,” Bonnie said.

After visiting several times, Hume noticed countless wild dogwood trees on the Gibson's wooded acreage. He decided these plants would help to convey the true wonder of the SIUE campus.

Beginning in 1967, Hume planted dogwood trees on SIUE's campus. He purchased between 4,000-5,000 trees from the Gibson family in just two months. As dogwoods rapidly sprouted throughout campus, Hume continued nurturing many more saplings in SIUE's nursery, preparing them for planting when needed due to tree attrition.

Bonnie earned a bachelor's in English and French in 1970 and a master's in counseling in 1976, both from SIUE. Like the dogwood trees, Bonnie went on to bloom, having a prosperous career in secondary education, private practice counseling, entrepreneurship and authoring children's books.

For Bonnie, the appeal of her alma mater's dogwood trees goes far beyond the eye – they represent her father and his passion for the beauty of nature. “My father left his signature on many landscapes,” she said. “Anyone who admired his trees, he would take them trees. If they were unable to plant them, he would plant for them, too.”

Jack Gibson passed away in 1996, but his magnificent dogwood trees still proudly breathe new life across SIUE's campus.

“The trees really beautify the campus,” Bonnie said. “For me, the trees symbolize something that these two men were able to create and leave behind – a natural legacy.”

[Southern Illinois University Edwardsville](#) provides students with a high quality, affordable education that prepares them for successful careers and lives of purpose. Built on the foundation of a broad-based liberal education, and enhanced by hands-on research and real-world experiences, the academic preparation SIUE students receive equips them to thrive in the global marketplace and make our communities better places to live. Situated on 2,660 acres of beautiful woodland atop the bluffs overlooking the natural beauty of the Mississippi River's rich bottomland and only a short drive from downtown St. Louis, the SIUE campus is home to a diverse student body of more than 14,000.