

Blackburn Bells Return To Campus Alumni Gift Honors Late Blackburn Professor Roy Graham

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CARLINVILLE, IL - Bells are ringing again on the Blackburn College campus. Following an alumni gift, the Blackburn carillon is operational again and an integral part of the Carlinville community has been restored. The gift was also made in honor of professor Roy Graham, a long-tenured Blackburn faculty member who passed earlier this year.

The restoration plan was funded and organized by Blackburn graduate and former staff member Steve Oberman '71. After more than 65 years of faithful ringing, the carillon was determined to be beyond repair. With a team from the Blackburn community, including Mark Kaiser '71, Eric Kaiser, staff members Sam Harding and Jorge Stewart, and current student Caleb Reiger, the new system was built and installed in 45 days. On September 1, the new Roy Arthur Graham Carillon was fully operational.

“Restoring the carillon was an involved process,” Oberman recounted. “We tried to get the original unit working, though determined that there were too many obsolete and worn parts in it to make it reliable again. Since the company that built it was still in business, purchasing and programming the new one was the only logical conclusion.”

Oberman explained that the sounds of the old system were created with a mix of motor-driven timers, switches, and electrically triggered strikers. “Their sound was harvested by what we'd call a guitar pickup today and fed to a 100-watt vacuum tube amplifier. The music was produced by reading music rolls similar to what is in a player piano,” he said.

The new system features a dedicated application touch screen computer that is programmed to select MIDI file recordings that replicate the sounds of the original tuned chime rods. “It takes up less space and weighs less than the old one, but it sounds just the same.”

The new carillon was named in honor of the late Blackburn professor Roy Graham. Originally from Granite City, IL, Graham began to work at Blackburn as an English professor in 1964. Roy was passionate about helping the students who passed through his classroom succeed and cared deeply about the college where he dedicated his career. In addition to serving as Department Chair and Faculty Marshal, Graham sang with the Blackburn choir and would frequently appear as Blackburn’s founder, the Reverend Gideon Blackburn, for campus celebrations. After dedicating over 50 years of his life to the college, he retired from Blackburn in 2014. Roy Graham passed away on June 18, 2020.

“I’m so appreciative of Mr. Oberman for his generosity and his willingness to make this donation, to bring the sound of bells back to campus, and for the idea of naming them after Roy Graham,” said Dr. Mark Biermann, President of Blackburn College. “The bells are a part of Blackburn’s identity -- a beautiful resource that helps our college and community have an even more distinctive character. To be able to honor the memory of Professor Graham’s outstanding service to Blackburn College with the bells is truly special.”

Dr. Biermann also praised the members of the team who worked on the project. “They are wonderful and typical of the people who make up the Blackburn community -- they just care and want to help.”