Help spread Lady Bird’s legacy

On LBJ’s 100th birthday, program to sow more wildflowers begins

By Janet Wilson

Lyndon Baines Johnson championed scenic beautification and the sanctity of the environment during his presidency. He and his wife, Lady Bird, worked tirelessly to clean up America’s highways, promote conservation and preserve the country’s natural landscape.

To honor that legacy and to help keep roadways, parks and neighborhoods in Central Texas scenic in wildflowers, the Austin American-Statesman and several project partners are launching Lady Bird’s Legacy: Sowing the Future, One Seed at a Time.

The goal is to help nurture Mrs. Johnson’s dream of beautifying America, especially the corner of it that Johnson loved so much, the Central Texas area they called home. It also will boost the state highway department’s wildflower seed budget.

Because of increased maintenance costs, it is the plan to spread the Texas Department of Transportation’s cut in half what it spends annually on wildflower seeds.

Although the fund-raising needs — from $1 million to $500,000 a year — about half of that is spent in Central Texas, Director of Population Management Donald Blackwell said:

The new campaign, which begins today, when Lyndon Johnson would have turned 100, will continue through 2013, when Lady Bird Johnson would have celebrated her centennial birthday.

“We are pleased to launch this campaign and call on our readers to join in honoring Lady Bird and the amazing work she did throughout her life to bring beauty and color to our roadways and parks,” said Michael Veris, associate publisher of the American-Statesman. “She led the way, showing us why preserving and beautifying our environment matters.”

The majority of donations to the American-Statesman’s Lady Bird’s Legacy campaign will buy seeds for road crews to spread in Central Texas. It costs the state about $3,600 per mile for wildflower seeds spread along the right-of-way. The state buys a mix of blackhills, plains cypress, lance-leaf cores and Indian paintbrush seeds that Blackwell says pay more “bang for the buck.” The cost per mile increases for areas with water rights of way.

Donations also will buy seeds for areas not maintained by the highway department that had a special connection to Mrs. Johnson, as well as for custom seed packets that local, grade-of-students can plant at home or in their neighborhoods.

FLOwERS: Campaign combines plantings with education effort

About the Lady Bird’s Legacy campaign

For one month each year through 2013, the American-Statesman will seek donations. The Austin Community Foundation is the fund administrator. Every dollar donated will be spent on seeds.

Money raised through Lady Bird’s Legacy will pay for plantings on Central Texas roadways.

Each year a special location will be chosen for seeding. In October, for instance, seeds will be spread on the north side of Lady Bird Lake, just west of the South First Street bridge. Other park plantings are being planned for this fall.

At the American-Statesman’s Newspapers in Education Supplement and the Wildflower Center have created a curriculum to teach fourth-grade students about wildflowers.

A special set of seeds, created by the Wildflower Center and Native American Seed, will be given to children participating in the Lady Bird’s Legacy educational campaign and to campaign donors to plant in their neighborhoods.

Other partners in the campaign this year include Wildseed Farms, Austin Parks and Recreation, the Trail Foundation and the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center.

How to donate

There are two ways to make a tax-deductible donation to the Lady Bird’s Legacy campaign:

1. Mail a check on 11x14 heavy stock to Lady Bird’s Legacy Fund, P.O. Box 5995, Austin, TX 78763-5995.

2. Online donations at www.amstates.com/wildflowers. Donors of $25 or more will have their names printed in the American-Statesman and at Wildflowers.com unless they wish to remain anonymous. Address and phone numbers will not be printed. All donors will receive a Lady Bird’s Legacy seed packet.

Individuals who donate $500 or more and corporate donors will receive a print of the Lady Bird Johnson tribute captured by the American-Statesman’s Ben Knight.

Wildflowers do more than make roadways beautiful, said Susan Ruff, executive director of the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, which Lady Bird co-founded in Austin in 1982.

“The center is the American-Statesman’s major partner in the campaign,” Ruff said. “Texas wildflowers are beautiful, but that’s only part of the story.” She said. “They are a rich part of our natural heritage.”

“They are climate-adapted, using no scarce water and other resources. And they provide habitat for birds, butterflies and other wildlife,” Ruff said.

“Prudently, planting wildflowers and native plants is one of the smartest and most rewarding things we can do to benefit the environment.”

Annette Lucy Baines Johnson, the youngest of the Johnson daughters, recalled a hand-printed sign she saw as her mother’s funeral procession moved last summer from Austin to the LBJ Ranch near Stonewall, where Lady Bird and Lyndon Johnson are buried. A small child held the sign aloft: As long as Sowers Moon, Lady Bird will live.”

“Then is what this project is doing,” Lucy Johnson said. “Coming together to celebrate the natural world, and to secure it for tomorrow and future generations, and in memory of Lady Bird Johnson.”

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AUSTIN AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Lyndon Baines Johnson championed scores of environmental bills during his presidency. He and his wife, Lady Bird, worked tirelessly to clean up America's highways, promote conservation and preserve the country's natural landscapes.

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Because of increased maintenance costs, in the past three years the Texas Department of Transportation has cut in half what it spends on wildflower seeds. Now the highway department's budget is about $2,600 per mile for wildflower seeds spread along both sides of the roads.

The state buys a mix of blackfoot, plains coneflower, lance-leaf coreopsis, Indian paintbrush seeds that can grow up to 4 feet tall and the orange, yellow and red flowers that add color to our roadways and parks,