

Taller every year

Leo Beuerman stood only 3 feet 3, but the legacy of Lawrence's 'little man gone blind' is immeasurable

By Marsha Henry Goff

A misshapen gargoyle of a man, he stood 3 feet 3 inches tall and weighed 60 pounds. He was crippled since birth, deaf from childhood, blind in one eye and had only limited sight in the other. He died in 1974 at age 74.

But on a recent Saturday, a standing room only crowd of more than 180 people squeezed into the lower level of Watkins Community Museum in Lawrence to view a 1969 film on the life of Leo Beuerman. Leo was an unlikely subject for a film, especially a documentary that was nominated for an Academy Award.

Leo was ubiquitous around Lawrence for decades, perched high on his specially designed tractor, or low to the ground in the little red cart from which he sold pencils, magazine subscriptions and offered cut-rate watch repair. And yet, the 14-minute story of his life would never have been translated into several languages and told to a worldwide audience had not the tender heart of a University of Kansas professor's wife been touched by a 1961 newspaper account:

"A 61-year-old handicapped Lawrence man was beaten and robbed early Sunday morning in the driveway of a service station. The victim, Leo Beuerman, suffered head cuts and other injuries when he was pulled from the small hand cart he uses for transportation and thrown to the pavement. The assault took place about 2 a.m. Beuerman told officers that he had fallen asleep and was awakened when he was pulled from the cart. Beuerman stands only 3 feet 3 inches tall, weighs 60 pounds and is deaf."

Catherine Weinaug ignored a compulsion to visit Leo in the hospital, sending flowers instead, but when she learned he had been dismissed to his rural home, she determined to find him and convey her regret of the incident. When she appeared at the door of a



The wording on the plaque in Leo's memory evoked a storm of controversy.

small rundown house where he lived with an older brother and sister, she was greeted with suspicion by the sister who eventually allowed her into the room that served as kitchen, sitting



Photo courtesy of Catherine Weinaug

After freeing his cart from the pulley system he designed for his tractor, Leo was ready to roll.

Catherine and meant it.

Leo became a frequent guest at the Weinaug house. The family — Catherine; her husband, Charles, now deceased but then head of KU's petroleum engineering department; and two boys, Carl, currently city manager of Stillwater, Okla., and Craig, now county administrator for Douglas County, Kan. — welcomed Leo with open arms.

The Weinaugs provided their small friend with his first tub bath. While Charles lifted Leo into the bathtub and left him splashing with glee, Catherine washed and dried his clothes. "They were almost dry before he called Charles to help him out of the tub," Catherine says. "I was beginning to fear he had drowned." No worries. Leo emerged from his long soak with a huge smile on his face and left enough dirt in the tub, according to Catherine, "to plant flowers!"

Seated on three encyclopedias, Leo gloried in dining in the company of his new friends. And when he spent the night, sleeping upright while resting his back against an overstuffed chair instead of the plastic orange crate he used at home, his earsplitting snoring evoked pitiful howls from the Weinaugs' Pekingese. Leo, being deaf, couldn't hear either snores or howls, but the unlovely duet kept the family awake and overcome by laughter.

For months after his attack, Leo watched his beloved tractor, which provided his only means of independence, sit immobile in the farmyard. Both the police and Leo's brother, fearing further injury to him, had forbidden him to drive again.

However, after much lobbying by Leo — "What could I do in this room for the rest of my life?" — Catherine

Using a tractor, cart and pulley system he designed, Leo maintained freedom of movement around Lawrence. Here he's shown descending from his tractor.

room and Leo's bedroom.

But Leo was overjoyed to have a visitor. As he communicated by writing on tablets, his voice barely intelligible, the two quickly became friends. Catherine learned that, in spite of Leo's lack of formal schooling, a keen intelligence lurked beneath his rough exterior. When she rose to leave, Leo, obviously starved for human contact, begged her to visit again and pleaded with her to be his friend. "Our friendship is just beginning," said

Photo courtesy of Catherine Weinaug

Photo courtesy of Jim Patti



Leo, now totally blind, used magnetic letters to communicate with a young friend.

arranged for him to take a test for a driver's license, even though she worried that she was setting up her diminutive friend for a gigantic disappointment. But Leo easily passed the written test and eagerly started his tractor so the examiner could follow him as he maneuvered his unique vehicle around town. "He followed me for an hour and a half," reported Leo excitedly to Catherine when his blaring tractor horn summoned her to the street in front of her home, "and then gave me my license." His excitement rivaled that of a teen-ager who had just secured a first license to drive, and for the same reason: to each the license represented freedom.

Catherine persuaded Leo to write his autobiography, in which he related his fear of snakes, asserted that he was not a quitter and expressed his wish to become involved in some profitable venture so he could "help people who are poor." She took his autobiography and some photos to her neighbor Russ Mosser, co-owner of Centron Films, a Lawrence industrial film company, and suggested that Leo would be a good subject for a movie.

Mosser assigned a camera crew to shoot some film of Leo but admits that "we didn't plan to make a movie."

Later, as Centron employees were

viewing film of Leo, an individual walked into the projection room and was shaken by a close-up view of Leo's face.

A script for the film had been written and edited, but Mosser and his partner, Art Wolf, weren't happy with the edit and temporarily shelved the project.

However, Leo was not about to let his chance to be a movie star pass him by. He flooded Centron, Catherine Weinaug and others with letters asking how his movie was coming along. Centron executives finally succumbed to Leo's version of Chinese water torture and assigned the script to Trudy Travis, one of the company's staff writers.

Travis, who had heard secondhand about the individual who was "grossed out" by Leo's closeup on the screen, crafted her script in such a way that viewers first see the world from Leo's perspective near the ground where cows loom large over him and snakes are way too close for comfort. She mentions the clocks and watches he repairs and notes that those timepieces "don't turn their faces away" from him. Once viewers have identified with Leo as a fellow human being, they are offered a glimpse of his face in the rearview mirror of his cart.

Centron was host of a party for Leo after the premiere of "Leo Beuerman" and awarded him a certificate stating he was "Best Actor of 1969" along with a trophy topped with a man on a tractor. Never mind that the trophy was originally designed as a prize in a tractor pulling contest. To Leo it meant more than an Oscar.

Leo was totally blind the last years of his life, and friends communicated with him by writing on his back. Living in a nursing home, he helped support himself by making leather key chains and bead necklaces, which were sold in local stores. Catherine Weinaug cherishes a stack of Leo's letters to her, many written after he lost his sight, utilizing a ruler to maintain straight lines.

And she treasures the notebooks in which he meticulously recorded his income: 17-jewel Hamilton, gold

commissioned a plaque by Lawrence sculptor Jim Patti to preserve the memory of Leo. They were stunned when Leo's own words — "Remember me. I'm the little man gone blind. I used to sell pencils on the street corner" — evoked a storm of controversy. The wording on the plaque was objected to by individuals in the community who believed the words represented a negative, stereotypical view of handicapped persons.

Leo's friends argued that there was no shame in any form of honest labor and said the words were simply Leo's way of identifying himself. Proponents of the wording won the battle and the bronze plaque, installed in the sidewalk at the northwest corner of Eighth and Massachusetts, features an image of Leo in his cart along with Leo's words reproduced in his own handwriting.

Fast forward to June 1998. As

Catherine prepared for the museum program in which Leo's film would be introduced to a new audience, many of whom were born a decade or more after his death, she reflected on one of her conversations with Leo when he confided to her that his mother had always assured him that he "would do something great to help people."

"Do you think I will do that?" asked the man who had already

received thousands of letters from viewers, young and old, rich and poor, handicapped and whole, who had watched his movie and responded with standing ovations.

"Leo," said Catherine, "you have given the world a greater gift than you know. Your dream of helping others is going on and on, reaching hundreds you could never meet. It is a greater gift than money, or a mechanical invention. Your faith has given the greatest gift of all. You have given us courage."

Almost a quarter of a century later, he still does. And that is why we continue to celebrate Leo.

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Photo courtesy of Catherine Weinaug



Centron employees presented Leo with a special "Best Actor" award after the documentary of his life was nominated for an Oscar.

Photo courtesy of Bob Rose

case wristwatch. Total cost (to fix) \$7.55, got \$8, (made \$.45) and expenditures (1 qt milk, \$.30; 1.7 Standard gasoline, \$.42).

Leo's records also prove he was adept at bartering for tractor parts: I traded 4 Sheaffer pens for plugs, a \$4 deal, was 28,526 miles.

When Leo died, Catherine, by then widowed, was living in Texas. She received the news in a telephone call from one of their mutual friends who said, "Leo didn't wake up this morning." As Catherine reread his last letter to her, the sorrow she felt at the loss of her friend was tempered by the knowledge that Leo was finally freed from the imprisonment of his own body.

After his death Leo's friends