

Thrill of the hunt

Gotha historian Kathleen Klare has set out to ensure the small West Orange County rural settlement is properly and historically recognized.



Courtesy photos

The Historic Gotha signs arrived via an 18-wheeler. Mike Neff, of Camp Ithiel, facilitated the delivery with the help of another camp affiliate.

AMY QUESINBERRY
COMMUNITY EDITOR

Kathleen Klare always has been passionate about history, but a years-long quest to learn everything she can about Gotha has led her on a journey of preservation for the small West Orange community.

"I have a strong interest in preservation, and this is my way of preserving an area that deserves to be talked about," she said.

Klare might be a Windermere resident now, but her roots are in Gotha. Her family settled there in 1911, and she was raised in Gotha.

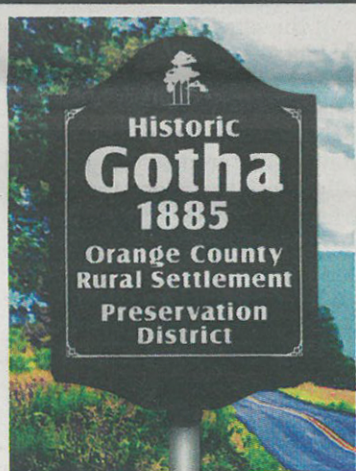
"Ever since I came back from Washington, D.C., in 2003, I've been involved with Gotha," she said.

She joined the Henry Nehrling Society, as well.

"Dr. Nehrling was a very good writer who documented a lot of good things about Gotha ... and that's what got me interested," Klare said. "I'm just trying to preserve (its history). I have been able to date Gotha back to 1786. It was founded in 1885. History is about following. You don't create it; you go where it leads you. It's the thrill of the hunt."

She is the community's historian and a board member of the Gotha Rural Settlement Association. Her latest title is project manager and designer for the Gotha Historic Sign project.

Looking to find a way to iden-



The new Historic Gotha signs measure 30 inches by 40 inches and will be placed at seven sites throughout the community.

tify Gotha's rural settlement, Klare designed seven historic entry signs that will be placed strategically around the perimeter of Gotha's preservation district.

The signs are finished, she said, and the Gotha Rural Settlement Association is waiting for Orange County to install them.

The signs are needed, because so few people know about Gotha and its unique history Klare said. For instance, it was one of only two German colonies in Florida. Klare suspects many see Gotha as a means to get from one place to another, and she's hoping the signs will bring some respect for the community.

Orange County District 1 Commissioner Betsy VanderLey secured grant monies through the county's Neighborhood Preservation and Revitalization Office to pay for the project.

Klare said the signs cost about \$23,000, which included the installation.

"We're going to have a big party when they're installed to acknowledge all the people involved, especially the county," she said.

IN THE PAST

Gotha was established in 1885, when Henry A. Hempel came to the area with the plan of forming a German town. He encouraged northerners to resettle in the area he named Gotha — in honor of his birthplace in East Germany.

The main street through Gotha is named for the settler.

Between 1885 and 1896, ornithologist and horticulturist Henry Nehrling bought 65 acres and established a 25-acre garden, which he named Palm Cottage Gardens. In the early 1900s, Dr. Nehrling tested more than 3,000 plants there.

In 1999, the Henry Nehrling Society was organized as a non-profit corporation to save this piece of Florida's pioneer history. His 1880s wood-frame home has been preserved on the six remaining acres of his garden.

The property was placed on the National Register of Historic Sites in 2000.

Nine years later, the society purchased the property to preserve the home and remaining historic gardens and to create an education center and community resource focusing on historic preservation, horticultural education and environmental conservation.

In 2013, the official Florida Heritage Landmark marker was installed.

Zion Lutheran Church was established between 1887 and 1894 on what is now Morton Jones Road. After the first building burned down, a new church was constructed at Hempel Avenue and Gotha Road sometime after the turn of the century. It still stands today.

Severe freezes in 1894 and 1895 destroyed most of the citrus groves that were planted by northerners who had made Gotha their home, and many of the families left.

Hempel filed a plat for Gotha with Orange County, but the community never incorporated.

In its heyday, the West Orange settlement had schools, churches, a railroad, social hall and sawmill.

In 1992, Orange County amended its charter to allow the designation of rural settlements as preservation districts; the Gotha Rural Settlement was then established. In 1995, it was designated as a historic preservation district.



Jay Gangwisch brings more than two decades of experience to

Sunset Park Elementary welcomes new principal

Former Millennia Gardens Elementary Assistant Principal Jay Gangwisch is ready to continue leading the Sunset Park Eagles to success.

DANIELLE HENDRIX
BLACK TIE EDITOR

Sunset Park Elementary School welcomed a new face on campus last week following the departure of former Principal Jane Bittick.

Jay Gangwisch, formerly the assistant principal at Millennia Gardens Elementary, has taken the helm for the Eagles. He replaces Bittick, who was tapped as the new principal for Eccleston Elementary.

Gangwisch was named principal during the Orange County School Board's Jan. 22 meeting. He holds a bachelor's degree in finance and accounting and a master's degree in education from the University of Central Florida, as well as an education specialist degree from Barry University.

After working in the business and finance industry for UPS, Gangwisch soon realized his love for sports and coaching and decided to veer into the education field.

Throughout his 24 years in education, he has served at the former Page Private School, St. Charles Borromeo Catholic School and Seminole County Public Schools' High School Transition Program.

"I've been in private schools, Catholic schools, public schools in Seminole County and public in Orange County at all different levels, from age 2 up through high school," he said. "I also taught business law at Full Sail University. I've taught from ages 2 up to 22."

When the opportunity at Sunset Park became available, the Bishop Moore Catholic High School graduate couldn't resist.

"It was a great opportunity," he said. "They're a high-performing school. It almost seemed like a perfect fit. I heard they have a great reputation — for their family involvement, for their staff and how dedicated they are — and when I saw it online, I did a lot of research on the school itself, and it just seemed like the perfect fit."

During a meeting for Sunset Park parents Tuesday, Jan. 15, Orange County Public Schools officials asked what they hoped to see in a new principal.

Many Sunset Park parents said they hoped their new principal would be encouraging and strong in collaboration. The ideal candidate would value communica-

tion, bring consistency, which the school already has, well, be open-minded, reflects currently in place, student-centered, professional and charismatic.

Gangwisch recognizes those as vital to a school.

"When you're a family, you got each other's backs. The staff's hearts are in the school, and that's why we're high performing. The teachers and the parents are involved. We have a dedicated staff and families who want to be part of it. My whole thing is family, and that's what I want to facilitate here."

Gangwisch also has a special-needs student background. He helped Seminole County students transition into high school and learning job skills.

"I've always loved working with the special-needs students," he said. "There are things we can do to reach them, and a lot of times, people don't have that background. My biggest joy out of this job is ... Sometimes, they're students that need us the most. Again, high-performing schools need special things, and I'm trying to do is increase efficiency across the board for our students and narrow the gap between students who need extra help and the high-achieving students."

Gangwisch said he is determined to ensure every student succeeds and reaches their full potential. He is open to trying different strategies and ideas to provide the best education experience possible for students and teachers.

"Everything is coming along so fast, and we're ahead of the curve. Let's challenge our kids," he said. "I intend to be the top high-performing student in the nation. ... Every student can succeed. It's just a matter of reaching them."

"I'm looking forward to knowing the community here," he said. "I want to do something that isn't just an idea now is to come in, build a culture and get ingrained. See what I can do to take it forward."