



# Roots of a Living Legacy

**J**oe Urbanovsky answered the telephone at his parent's home to a woman asking to speak to his father. He nearly fainted at the woman's tranquil response when he asked who was calling – it was the First Lady of the U.S., Mrs. Lady Bird Johnson. In this moment, he began to truly understand the fame and prestige his dad had not only at Texas Tech University, but also throughout the nation.

When Elo J. "Prof" Urbanovsky came to what was then Texas Technological College in 1949, five buildings made up campus. As chairman of the Department of Park Administration, Landscape Architecture, Horticulture and Entomology and the Campus Landscape Architect, Urbanovsky was also hired to establish the campus.

From the Spanish architecture to Will Roger's statue being repositioned 23 degrees so the horse's posterior faced toward College Station and away from downtown Lubbock, Prof Urbanovsky shaped the university many know and love.

"What you see today as the campus, I'm going to call it the cohesiveness, you look at this building (Agricultural Sciences), which is just older than old, and then go look at a brand new building like the United Spirit Arena or English/Philosophy and they all still hang together – that's Elo J. Urbanovsky," said Ernest Fish, Ph.D., retired professor at Texas Tech. "He insisted that that happen."

Fish laughed with his hand on his cheek as he described Prof as colorful and dynamic. To this day, Fish said he

sarcastically refers to the bulky berm outside of the Plant and Soil Sciences building as Mt. Elo. He said he was there the morning Urbanovsky decided it was going to be built, and when he walked out later that afternoon, it was there. Prof was a true mover and shaker, and Fish said to say that he was a powerful person would be a huge understatement.

"Every body knew him," Fish said. "I mean everybody knew Prof Urbanovsky. They even knew his car. He drove a great big red old Ford LTD, and he could park it anywhere, anytime and nobody was going to say anything."

Urbanovsky loved working with living objects. His passion for landscape architecture stemmed from his desire to be outside and experience the beauty of nature. According to Urbanovsky's son, Joe, Prof considered buildings a necessary evil.

Fish said Urbanovsky cared intensely about students and about the university. He had a unique method for intertwining the two together when designing. Right after a building was constructed, he never built sidewalks. He waited for the kids to make the path and that is where the sidewalks went.

In the classroom, Prof did not allow his students to settle for mediocrity. He was committed to his students, but never easy on them. Joe, alumnus of Tech Park Administration and Landscape Architecture, said his dad always had a better idea, and it was often a nightmare to be his son because others expected him to be perfect.

*"He wanted a place that students could walk and be open."*

“He had a famous statement, and I hated to hear it,” Joe said. “He would say, ‘you know, that’s not bad, but I think I’ve got another idea.’”

Joe said his dad would not have traded teaching for any job in the world. Although he retired from Texas Tech in 1975, he still had an office on campus until his passing because he did not want to fully give up his role in education.

“I would ask him, ‘dad why don’t you do something else, you’re pretty well known as a landscape architect?’” Joe said. “He always said, ‘I get more fun out of teaching kids – that’s what keeps me young.’”

According to the American Academy for Park and Recreation Administration, Urbanovsky made numerous contributions to professional organizations as president of the American Institute of Park Executives and of the Texas Turfgrass Association, director of the Southwest Park and Recreation Training Institute, and as a member of the Board of Trustees of the National Recreation and Park Association.

Sharon Pope, Urbanovsky’s secretary for more than 20 years, said Prof’s talents endeared him to many noteworthy people, including the Rockefeller family and former President and Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson.

Mrs. Johnson’s interest in the outdoors led her to establish her beautification program during her stay in the White House, and Urbanovsky served on the committee for a 10-year period. He also worked closely with her on projects at the Lyndon B. Johnson Ranch and the Texas Highway Department.

“We had Lady Bird Johnson’s personal assistant’s private number,” Pope said with a playful grin. “When he needed to talk to her, he’d say, ‘get the Bird on the phone.’ So I would call her assistant, Carol, and say Professor Urbanovsky would like to speak to Mrs. Johnson. She would get on the phone, and he would always say, ‘hello Bird,’ and she would say, ‘my dear friend, Elo!’”

In recognition of his contributions to Texas Tech and his national leadership in the field, Urbanovsky was selected as one of the first Paul Whitfield Horn Professors at Texas Tech in 1967. This is the highest honor the university can bestow on one of its faculty.

Urbanovsky passed away in July 1988 after a lengthy illness. He had no idea there would soon be a student park on campus named in his memory – Urbanovsky Park.

As Joe walked through campus with companions after his father’s death, he pondered over the vastness around the tennis courts and intramural fields. He saw students playing catch and frisbee with friends and was instantly reminded of his dad.

In October 1991, Joe was invited into a Texas Tech Board of Regents meeting for discussion to name the park in his father’s memory after mentioning the idea to colleagues. The vote was unanimous.

“Dad would have wanted students to use the park,” Joe said. “That’s why we had the idea to name the park after him. He didn’t want a building. He wanted a place that students could walk and be open.”

Although Urbanovsky was not alive to see the park after its dedication in 1989, Joe said he believes his dad is always there in spirit, watching each day as thousands of students enjoy their scenic walk to class or a rowdy game of flag football. From his vision to make the campus stunning, to his recognition as one of the most influential professors in history, Urbanovsky’s deep roots live on through Urbanovsky Park.

“I know he looks down at the park every single day with joy in his soul,” Joe said. 🙏



Top photo courtesy of Joe Urbanovsky

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