

# Hunka Hunka Locust Turns Elvis

Staff

**W**hen Dr. Lorelee Stevens,  
Community Outreach

credit coordinator, moved back to her hometown of Tonganoxie last summer, she just wanted to blend into the neighborhood. Trouble is: There's a 10-foot Elvis in her backyard. Now the locust tree-turned-Elvis has become a piece of public art.

"It's really fun to have people knock on the door and ask permission to take a photograph in my backyard," Stevens said.

Initially Stevens planned to have the old locust tree removed before it fell on her 1903 house. But her father, 79-year-old Dr. Phil Stevens, who has practiced medicine in Tonganoxie since 1955, suggested a tree sculpture. Stevens' father and sister had tree sculptures completed after a 2000 microburst damaged trees at their respective homes, also in Tonganoxie. Lorelee Stevens' father commissioned Daniel Boone; her sister Chief Tonganoxie.

"Yard art isn't really my style, but I couldn't say 'no' to my father. So I thought if I am going to go kitsch, I am going to go kitsch all the way. That's when I decided on Elvis," Stevens said.

Artist Russ Ehart spent about 25 hours carving with a chain saw, designing freestyle from photographs. Standing on a scaffold, Ehart began with the Elvis's head and distinctive pompadour and worked down to the blue suede shoes. The hardest part? Cutting the 1950s-microphone in one long piece.

"It's a God-given talent," Ehart said. "I don't have to do anything but run the chain saw."

Ehart, who divides his time between McLouth, Kan., and Cold Brook, N.Y., also credits his MS200 Stihl chain saw. The chain-saw artist drew an audience while completing Elvis in time for Stevens' housewarming party Sept. 30.

"My 6-year-old son Simon liked coming home from school and watching Elvis come to life," Stevens said.

Elvis's face, hands, shoes and microphone are painted; the remaining sculpture is natural wood color. The whole tree stump is coated in a polyurethane, which should give Elvis a life span of about 10 years.

Stevens says the neighbors like Elvis. The pastor



in the parsonage across the street commented that Elvis sold more gospel records than any of his rock-and-roll hits.

To see Stevens' Elvis sculpture, take I-435 W to exit US-24W/US-40 W (by the Legends); go 12 miles west to Tonganoxie; at the second stoplight, turn left onto 4th Street; turn right on Shawnee St. Elvis croons on the corner of 5th and Shawnee St. (424 Shawnee St.). 🌸

Dr. Lorelee Stevens, Community Outreach credit coordinator, stands next to the 10-foot Elvis in her backyard.