

## FAIR FOREVER

Foundation raising money to give a home to Illinois State Fair artifacts

By BRUCE RUSHTON  
STAFF WRITER

*Monday, December 03, 2007*

Eleven years ago, a man tapped Pam Gray on the shoulder at the Illinois State Fairgrounds and helped set a course.

"He says, 'Can I show you a picture?'" Gray recalled Friday.

In her second year as a volunteer coordinator at the fair, Gray was busy. Besides taking care of volunteers, Gray had helped set up an exhibit of old fair photographs that recently had been discovered during renovation work of a building near Peoria Road and Sangamon Avenue.

But she took a few moments and followed the man to the display, which included an old black-and-white photo of Richard Nixon reaching out to shake hands with a boy about 12 years old. Their fingers were inches apart.

"He points to the young man and says 'That's my boy,'" Gray said. "And he starts crying. 'We didn't know this photo existed,' he said."

The man's son had died in the Vietnam War. Gray made sure he got a copy of the photo.

"That's what did it for me," said Gray, who has formed a non-profit corporation aimed at raising money to establish an Illinois State Fair museum.

"When you're in the middle of it, these experiences and these stories, you think 'Wow.' All year long, and especially during the fair, I get those kinds of stories."

Since the encounter, Gray has helped put together an annual exhibit on the fair's history. She has collected plenty of artifacts - old blue ribbons, plaques and, of course, pictures - but has no adequate place to store them. They're stashed under the Grandstand.

"There's no heat," she said. "I want to have a building where there's heat, there's air conditioning and there's protective lighting."

Gray figures it will cost about \$5 million. The federal government this year bestowed non-profit status on her group, called the Illinois State Fair Museum Foundation, which was formed last year. Gray is chairwoman of the foundation board.

Some of the money, she says, will come from bottled water sales at the fair. That's what the Iowa State Fair Blue Ribbon Foundation does in Iowa, where more than \$60 million has been raised for capital improvement projects at the fair since the Iowa foundation was created in 1993.

"If Iowa can raise \$63 million, I'm sure Illinois, which has a lot more corporations, can do better than that," Gray said.

Gray is already looking ahead to improving the fairgrounds in other ways once the museum is built.

"The fence around the fairgrounds: OK, how ugly can we get?" Gray said. "We want to make sure that the fair is going to be around in another 100 years."

Bruce Rushton can be reached at 788-1542 or [bruce.rushton@sj-r.com](mailto:bruce.rushton@sj-r.com).