

# Edison effort likened to David vs. Goliath

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MILAN – Jesse Owens might have enjoyed backing from The Ohio State University, where he studied. And the Wright brothers might have enjoyed support from an area larger than Milan. Supporters of them and other famous Ohioans might have had a lot more money, power and influence. But in the end, folks at the Edison Birthplace Museum apparently had more drive and resourcefulness in their effort to land their hometown hero's statue in Washington. Perhaps politicians and their backers should take a page from the Edison faithful come November.

Representatives from The Ohio Historical Society said Wednesday that Edison was the top vote getter in a campaign to replace the statue of the late Gov. William Allen. Lawmakers felt Allen's racial views do not represent Ohio well. After a series of public meetings around the state to learn about the lives and contributions of worthy Ohioans, the committee narrowed the list of more than 90 to 10 in February. Then, committee members asked the public to choose. From March 20 to June 12, more than 37,000 Ohioans cast ballots for one of 10 nominees for whom they thought should stand for Ohio in Washington. Of the total, Edison received 12,132 votes, followed by the Wright brothers with 10,895 and former U.S. Rep. and Civil Rights champion William M. McCulloch with 3,569 votes.

Lois Wolf, director of the Thomas Edison Birthplace museum, attributed the inventor's victory to "lots of hard work."

"We just kept networking to get the ballots out," Wolf said. "We just networked as hard as we could." Wolf said birthplace volunteers worked until as late as June 12, the voting deadline, to scan and send in ballots. When people visited the museum, volunteers asked them to vote for Edison and to encourage others to do so. In April, the museum hosted about 100 engineers from the General Electric facility in Twinsburg. Volunteers compiled packets of information for people on the four, back-to-back tours. There were 100 ballots in each packet, Wolf said.

She noted that Don Gfell, a birthplace trustee, a lifelong Edison enthusiast and a Rotarian, wrote letters to fellow organization members. There's a "broad base of support from all over the state, and all over the country" for Edison, Wolf said. She recalled a 10-year-old boy and his mother visiting the museum. "Don made him his buddy and said 'I'm charging you with a responsibility to take these votes back to your school,'" Wolf said.

The museum offered free walk-throughs during International Museum Day, and Gfell, a former science teacher, displayed many interactive science projects based on Edison's inventions. Gfell said he "surely was very confident" that Edison would win but thought the vote total would be very close. "I'm just really thrilled to death," Gfell said, calling the victory, "a highlight of Milan, Ohio and the United States." "I just want to really, really express thanks to every individual in our entire area that voted. It was definitely a real grass-roots effort."

National Statuary Collection Study Committee members have said the public vote will be the greatest factor in its final recommendation to the full General Assembly for approval. Gfell said state Sen. Mark Wagoner, chairman of the committee, told him he saw no reason why lawmakers wouldn't confirm the public's choice of Edison. But Gfell and others won't stop campaigning because of the popular vote result and Wagoner's comment. "We're still going to work with the committee to make sure it does happen," Gfell said. "We're not going to just give up and quit yet."