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Fall 2018

### Archive Paper: Memorial Prayer Chapel

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Archive Paper: Memorial Prayer Chapel

Hannah Gumbert

Taylor University

### **The Accident**

As the spring semester was in full bloom, the community of Taylor University rallied together for the inauguration of their new president, Dr. Eugene Habecker. However, April drew to a close the campus found itself gathering together for a different occasion. On the evening of April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2006, a Taylor University van carrying nine individuals back from Taylor's Fort Wayne campus was struck by a semi-truck that crossed the median into the south-bound lane. Five individuals survived the crash and four students died upon impact. What was once a joyous occasion, the inauguration of a new president, quickly turned into a time of mourning and questioning as word spread fast about the accident across campus. Individuals questioned how any good could come out of such a heart-wrenching situation. As the students, faculty, and staff were notified about the event, before the names of those involved in the accident were even released, the Taylor community came together in prayer.

The night of the accident many did not know what to even pray for or how to even respond emotionally. Nevertheless, many stopped what they were doing and joined together across campus in prayer. Jim Garringer, Taylor's director of media relations, later stated that "When word of the accident spread the first response was prayer" (Murray, 2008). As time seemed to pass slowly on campus the names of the individuals involved in the accident were released. Brad Larson, Laurel Erb, Betsy Smith, Monica Felver, and Whitney Cerak were announced as dead. Connie Magers, Michelle Miller, Vickie Rhodes, and Laura VanRyn had been taken to the hospital for immediate treatment. Members of the Upland community stepped up and out to reach out to the university during that great hardship. Mayor Wayne Seybold made it clear to the president that the town was there to stay in support. "Our community, whatever we can do, we're going to mourn with you...anything you need from us, we're going to be there with

you” (Luy, 2006). Throughout the entire experience God provided support, wisdom, and guidance when the university needed it most.

In the months and weeks that followed, Taylor’s campus was struck by more damaging news; Laura VanRyn, who was thought to be alive, was actually Whitney Cerak. Laura passed away in the van accident instead of Whitney, and their identities had been mixed up in the chaos of the event. The VanRyn and Cerak families’ worlds were turned upside down once again. Over the next couple years, as Whitney went through tremendous amounts of recovery, the two families came together to tell their story. There was no anger, bitterness, jealousy, or resentment felt toward God, Taylor University, or each other; rather they gathered together to tell the world about the great God that they serve. Throughout the pages of the book *Mistaken Identity*, the Cerak and VanRyn family continually point to their faith and love for the Lord as the cornerstone of their faith. Many individuals were impacted by the faith of the two families. As an increasing number of people followed the story being recorded through both families’ personal blogs, lives were changed and transformed. One reader of their blog commented, “I feel as though I have been blind for the first twenty-one years of my life. And your faith and devotion has shown me the light” (VanRyn, VanRyn, Cerak, Cerak, Cerak, 2009, p. 205). As each family buried their daughter, they both prayed that their daughters lives would be a witness to many others, no matter how long or short they had on this earth.

### **Forever Remembered**

Each of the individuals that lost their lives in the accident will be remembered by Taylor for the love they had for the Lord. They died while serving God and the university, a feat that will be remembered. Brad Larson’s parents found his journal as they were going through his things after the accident and they stumbled upon a journal entry he had written two days before

the accident: “God I realize that you are the potter and I am the clay and the importance of using me now for whatever purpose you have for my life” (Mackenzie, 2008). When Brad wrote these words, he had no idea that others would see the thoughts he pinned down, nor did he realize how God was going to use him to impact the lives of many individuals throughout the university and the world at large.

The families that lost a loved one in the accident found ways to give back to the university and the community in remembrance of their life and legacy. Betsy Smith’s family started an annual 5K run in Decatur, Illinois dedicated to her life and legacy. In the 2006 race, \$10,000 was raised with half of the money going towards a scholarship set up in Betsy’s name and the other half going towards ReaLife, an organization aimed at engaging elementary children in the neighboring city of Marion through Bible stories and intentional small group engagement. Every fall from 2006 through the fall of 2015 a 5K run took place to raise money for ReaLife. Betsy had a love for the children at the Boys and Girls Club of Marion and was hoping to remain in Marion after graduation to continue to minister to them and be a part of their lives. During the ten years that the family had the 5K race, they raised enough money to build a playground at the Boys and Girls Club in memory of Betsy. In August of 2015, work began to construct the playground that now stands in honor of the love and work that Betsy showed for the kids at the club (Sells, 2015; Baird, 2006; Yoder, 2006). Laurel Erb’s family chose to have donations made to Taylor’s art department, and even though Whitney survived, Whitney Cerak’s family directed funds toward the Invisible Children organization, who reach out to children suffering in Africa (Baird, 2006). The evidence of each one of these individual’s faith continues to impact the lives of people that may have never had the opportunity to meet these caring students.

### **The Memorial Prayer Chapel**

12 years later, Taylor University has not forgotten the horrible events that took place on April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2006. Prayer was such an essential coping mechanism that the university used to understand the situation in the wake of the accident that it became one of the defining characteristics of the accident for those that attended and worked at Taylor. Dr. Gene Habecker was quoted in a magazine supporting this fact, stating that “The most transforming result of the way the campus processed this tragedy was that prayer has been elevated to a whole new level. This change was not temporary; prayer has become a real part of the fabric of this community” (Mackenzie, 2008). It became apparent to the administration and students alike that there needed to be a means for Taylor to honor and remember the lives of their friends and students that passed away in the tragic accident. During the fall of 2006 discussion began to circulate with a vision of building a memorial prayer chapel to remember the accident victims. Taylor already had a prayer chapel, as well as Rediger Chapel on the Upland campus; however, individuals longed for a more personal chapel that would be set apart from the others. Ron Sutherland, the current special assistant to the president and longtime administrator, expressed the University’s dream for the building.

We want it to be a memorial to those who have died, but one that is full of hope and is Christ-centered. Our goal is that it will be a spiritual retreat and a place of tranquility. My biggest hope is that this would be one of those places that students come back to in years to come. Not only because of their memory of what happened, but also how it really affected them and their ability to communicate and speak one-on-one with their Father. (Bragg and Holley, 2006)

This building was to have a more personal feeling but also a place where individuals could come and honor all the people associated with Taylor and it's legacy, both past and future.

The university officials recognized that if they were going to spend the time and the resources on building a chapel to commemorate the legacy of the individuals at Taylor University, then they needed to do it to the best of their ability. Three firms were selected to bring forward their concepts for the memorial prayer chapel to the university board for approval. Two of these firms expressed a willingness to provide their services free of fees because of how moved they had been by the project at hand. This was a special building that needed to be honored and created by a firm with an eye for details. The planning board decided to move ahead with Design Collaborative, a firm based out of Fort Wayne who had done a good deal of work designing chapels and churches throughout Indiana (Design Collaborative, 2006). Design Collaborative provided a wide repertoire of their work for the board to look over to make sure that they were making the right hiring decision for the project.

Just as the Board of Trustees and architectural team placed great focus on who designed the chapel, they also were particular in deciding the chapel's location. After much research it was decided that the prayer chapel would be situated between residential and academic buildings. This location was not decided because it was located on a common path that individuals traveled on each day, but instead to be set apart. It was to be a place of remembrance that individuals would have to go slightly out of their way to reach, but still close enough that individuals could easily choose to be a part of it (Taylor University, 2008c). Zondervan library was designed to be a tunnel of sorts or a bridge to guide students from residential to academic life, but the Memorial Prayer Chapel was slightly off the beaten path, a place that individuals could not avoid seeing it

but they could avoid walking through. The team leading the building plans wanted individuals to recognize the unique and special building.

During the Spring semester of 2008 the Memorial Prayer Chapel was completed and was the first building in Taylor's history to be created and committed specifically to prayer. The chapel consists of a 75-seat chapel, an atrium allowing for individuals to walk through to the other side, water fountains, prayer alcoves inside, and prayer gardens. The 75-seat chapel was designed to be able to accommodate a whole residence hall wing for wing events. There are two prayer alcoves situated off of the chapel area, each being a small room with a prayer bench allowing for private prayer. Outside, the circular building is surrounded by alcoves with benches and plants. Each alcove allows for visitors to have a private space of prayer in an outdoor environment. Within the atrium there are three memorial areas celebrating the life and service of distinguished individuals. In the center of the atrium there are six plates, one for each individual that passed away in the car accident on April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2006, including a picture and a biography, while another plate provides the background and the reason why the community remembers this tragic day. Another one of the memorial areas is dedicated to the lives and memories of those in the Taylor community who have passed away while enrolled or employed with Taylor. The third memorial area is dedicated to those that are called the "Great Cloud of Witnesses". This wall was designed as a place for individuals to remember their loved ones who have impacted their lives in a tremendous way. Each name that appears on the Great Cloud of Witnesses wall was placed there through a \$1,000 donation towards the Prayer Chapel (Taylor University, 2008b).

This chapel could not have been completed without the work of Michael Kinder and Sons, the contracting firm that worked diligently on this project. Throughout their work on the project they willingly offered up some of their services free of charge (Garringer, 2009). Many

community members, alumni, faculty, staff, and students also offered their services in assisting with the construction of the prayer chapel. Many individuals came together through this building project to demonstrate their love for the community of Taylor and the Lord. The initial price estimation for the whole project was to be 1.7 million dollars, however the cost was reduced significantly through all the help and generous donations. The class of 1957 alone donated \$300,000 for the prayer chapel, the largest amount donated by a 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary class (Hosford, 2007). Without the help of so many individuals, the dream of creating this Memorial Prayer Chapel would not have come to fruition.

### **Dedication**

In 2008 the Memorial Prayer Chapel was completed and the Taylor community gathered together to dedicate the chapel. Beginning on April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2008, students led a prayer vigil for a week even through the early hours of the morning until April 26<sup>th</sup>, two years after the accident, when the chapel would be dedicated (Taylor University, 2008c). During the first annual Heritage Weekend the prayer chapel was dedicated with reflection, singing, scripture reading, doves, and of course, prayer. Throughout the weekend there was a special focus on prayer as grandparents came on campus for Grandparent's Day and the student riders engaged in the daring Taylathon bike race (Taylor University, 2008b). Individuals came from all over the country to remember and commemorate the lives of the those lost in the Taylor Community. That weekend, as Dr. Eugene Habecker addressed the many individuals gathered, he summed the past however many years it was well,

Prayer unites us as we go to Him with all of our needs. We have been through so much together as a campus...The highs and the lows, the hurts and the joys. As we give

ourselves to the Lord in prayer and go to Him with pure hearts and forgiving spirits...He unites us.

I believe this new prayer chapel will become one of the really special places on our campus. The Prayer Chapel Committee, Board of Trustees and the architectural team have really captured a vision for what we believe will be a fitting tribute to the lives of Laurel, Monica, Brad, Betsy, and Laura, along with many others whose lives have touched and shaped ours in such a significant way (Taylor University, 2008a).

During the weekend of the dedication ceremony, a guest book was laid out for individuals to sign. From April 2008 through July 2009 there were over 3,000 lines filled in the guest book. Some lines were signed by a whole wing or a family, but all together individuals came from far and wide, from California to Florida, from Washington to New York, and even from as far as Germany to join together as a Taylor community. The power of God's love that strength beyond the small town of Upland, across the whole world, was made so evident in the love, admiration, and hope that exists within the Memorial Prayer Chapel.

### **Lasting Impact**

As Taylor's 2008 Heritage Weekend drew to a close and individuals went their separate ways, a promise still rang true as the words from the weekend were recorded.

This then is the inspiration for the Memorial Prayer Chapel. May this building stand as a reminder to all who enter it that the God of the Bible remains Emmanuel "God with us". May it also prompt us to recall that, in good times and bad, God still hears those who cry out to Him. SO, from this place, may the promise of the Scripture be prayerfully proven-again and again: We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed, perplexed but not in

despair; persecuted, but not abandoned, struck down, but not destroyed (2 Corinthians 4:8) (Taylor University, 2008b).

As the Memorial Prayer Chapel still stands 12 years after the terrible accident that shook the Taylor community, God's message still rings true time and time again; prayer has the power to unite each individual in personal communication and relationship with God Almighty as He walks beside them in both their time of joy as well as sorrow.

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