

Remarks for the Unveiling of the Memorial Sculpture for the Van Accident Victims
By Utah State University President Stan L. Albrecht
Taggart Student Center Juniper Lounge

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Two and a half years ago when we held a remembrance on the one-year anniversary of the van accident, I made the following observation: “The story that is each of our individual lives will include periods of joy, happiness, achievement, triumph, failure, pain, sorrow, and sometimes tragedy. (None of us will escape the highs and lows, the good times and the bad, that will, in some form or another, become a part of our personal stories.)

Woven together with longer bits and pieces that are more mundane, routine, and commonplace, these moments make up a life. But some of the moments ascend well above others in their significance, and in their impact. We can identify ready examples: all of us recall with great clarity where we were when the first reports of 9-11 came; those of us who are older similarly remember exactly where we were and what we were doing when we heard of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.”

For the Utah State university family, the tragedy of September 26, 2005 is one of those moments. Like many of you here today, I can replay exactly where I was and what I was doing when I first heard of the accident. I can also recall with explicit detail what happened over the next few hours as our administrative team gathered in the office complex of Champ Hall to receive reports from the highway patrol, to make initial contacts with families, to address the immediate blitz of media interest and attention, and to make plans that would help each of us work through the critical decisions and actions of the next few days.

While the greatest impact will always be on the families of these outstanding young men and their teacher, each of us who were in any way involved in the tragedy and its aftermath will be forever changed. Time has passed, but we still remember. And in our remembering, it is our most sincere desire that those of you who have suffered most from the loss will continue to feel our love and support.

One way of assuring that we never forget, and one way of assuring that those who come after us are reminded of this tragic, but important chapter of our history, is to create a memorial to commemorate those whose lives were lost. Very soon after the accident, we began discussing a way to create a lasting remembrance of these nine individuals — a memorial that would depict what they meant to those closest to them and to the University. Using the words of Perry Van Schelt from Monument Arts, we wanted to ensure that “future generations will know the emotional significance of this event.” We wanted to create something so that these individuals will not be forgotten.

A working group was formed to select a design for the memorial — that group included Bruce Miller, Braden Jenson, Robbie Petersen, Tom Peterson, Gary Straquadine, and Scott Wansgard from the Department of ASTE, as well as Miriam Cajal and Chuck Gay from USU Extension, and Victoria Berry from the USU Museum. After a review of several proposals that were

submitted in response to an RFP, Monument Arts of Salt Lake City was selected for the design and construction of the memorial.

The outpouring of support for the memorial has been wonderful — many people have given generously and from the heart. A solicitation to all College of Agriculture alumni brought in thousands of dollars — gifts ranging from \$5 to \$500. We also received significant gifts from the five departments in the College of Agriculture, USU Student Government, Student Services, the President's Office, the Utah Agricultural Experiment Station, and the Utah Farm Bureau. These gifts have allowed us to create something noteworthy and beautiful.

Physical memorials are important for preserving history. They help connect the present to the future. They help us better understand how the human experience has been shaped, and how it is shared. For us, this is particularly significant because these were Ag students. Their story is tied not only to Utah State University, but to our larger land-grant mission, to the importance of agriculture in our history, and to the land they loved so deeply. A monument of this type will remind us all of a shared history and shared values. This, in turn, will allow future students to connect their lives to the events of the past that helped define who we are.

Every memorial has stories to tell. If you have visited the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C., you certainly have felt something of the stories that are represented there. This memorial will serve, for us, a similar function. It will create for future generations of USU students the opportunity for an emotional connection with those whose stories are represented in the sculpture.

For a memory to endure, it must be shared, and this is one way of sharing. We felt that last evening as we shared the initial unveiling with the families. We all experienced feelings of awe at the beauty of the sculpture and the way in which it depicted so wonderfully each individual life. Today we are pleased to share with all of you the finished product. As you will hear in more detail, panels were designed specifically for each individual who died in the accident. The design also includes furrows in a field at the bottom of the panels and the sky-line of the Wellsville Mountains across the top — both scenes that are well known in Cache Valley.

This is a temporary home. Eventually the sculpture will be placed in the new Agriculture Building that will anchor the quad directly across from Old Main. That building will be a memorial to our land-grant tradition and a physical marker of our continuing commitment to agriculture. We lost nine friends but they leave behind classmates, faculty, and programs across a range of agricultural disciplines that will remain strong, robust, and committed to the future health of USU's agriculture mission here in Utah, across the western United States, and even around the world.

I have one CD that always remains in the player in my car. It is William Joseph's "Within." Often as I am driving, which I do a great deal of, I play that CD. Each time the haunting and lovely sounds of Homeward Bound come on, I reflect on September 26, 2005 and whatever else may have been happening that day recedes into the background as I am reminded of those things that are most important in our lives — family, friends, community, service, sharing.

To the families: I have learned much from each of you — lessons of courage, of faith, of caring, of friendship, of endurance. Thank you. To the Utah State University family: you have taught lessons of community, of compassion, of support, of love extended freely to strangers. The way you have all responded continues to make me feel great honor and pride in being an Aggie. This beautiful memorial will now provide another means of extending those feelings of honor and pride across generations of Aggies yet to come. Thank you.