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## **The Multiple Languages Of Loss:**

### **A Comparative Analysis of Memorialization Mediums**

Just as the sunrise graces the timeline of our mortality, there must always be a final sunset to put that same light of livelihood to rest. As we all know, with a loss of life, the world moves on, the Sun continues to cycle, and we grieve through it all. It is in this grief and the expression of grief is where we find interesting cultural ways of memorialization. In our short lives, remembering and immortalizing someone who is no longer with us, becomes a way in which we keep their memory alive. Memorialization takes shape in many different variations, shapes and forms, some being long standing, some being temporary. Some forms are accidental, whereas some are planned and thought out. However, no matter how or where these manifestations stand “Grief is itself a medicine” (Cowper) and it is the way in which we communicate through physical manifestations that we are able to look into the window that we portray as grief. It is through these manifestations and the mediums of objects such as shrines, longstanding memorials, and a digital grave presence that highlights the way in which grief and the lasting impressions of those lost, shines through.

In this contextual paper I will be discussing three separate research objects. First I will discuss the passing of Alanna Gallagher, a 6 year old girl with a brutal and unexpected death. I will discuss her temporary roadside memorial as my first research object, as well as a permanent longstanding memorial created in her honor for my second research object. Lastly I will be

discussing the death of Kaitlyn Kotzmann, an 18 year old young-adult who passed away in a car crash during her freshman year of college. For third research object, I will be using examples of her social media platform on Instagram and how it became the primary mode of memorialization for those close to her due to limitations from the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. Throughout these research objects I will be explaining my connection to them as well as descriptions of the objects themselves. After discussions of the research objects, I will discuss separate examples of living memorials, interactive memorials, temporary memorials as well as the more modern occurrence of digital memorials.

### **Description and Context**

Alanna Gallagher was a young 6 year old girl who lived in Saginaw, Texas with her Mom, two Dads, and older sister. Like most kids, her neighbors claimed that they would often see her playing outside alongside fellow neighborhood children, often riding around on her purple scooter (Dallas Morning News). However, on the morning of July 1st, 2014, Alanna went missing from her usual outside playtime. Later that same afternoon, she was found deceased in a trash bag on the side of the road, brutally raped and murdered, roughly a mile away from her home neighborhood. Tragically, this event happened where I grew up, with her body being found by my two neighborhood friends just a few houses down from my own. This being said, I feel it's important to note that some details within this case come from my own memory. I would like to acknowledge this because this creates potential bias with something that I witnessed first hand. However, since I was able to witness the shrines and memorialization methods coming and going in real time, it offers more observational information than one might be able to find through a typical subject not found first-hand. I would also like to note that Saginaw, being a

suburb, had much less crime than its bigger neighbor, Fort Worth. Statistically, violent crimes in Saginaw were 34% lower than the national average (Saginaw, TX Crime). Which made Saginaw a desired place to settle down in the DFW area, specifically for parents with small children. On top of the cruelty of the crime, It is because of this sense of safety and security that I suspect made many people react outwardly with grief, making it more of a communal grieving process.

Although there were many memorialization methods preceding Alanna's death, I will first be focusing on a large street memorial that was placed in the spot where she was found. Similar to many collective street memorials, this one started small (See figure 1.1) and grew with the help of the mourning community. Located where her body was found, this street memorial sat promptly on an average street curb, centered around the homeowners mailbox (who was not affiliated with the Gallagher family). It initially began with just a few objects such as pictures, and candles. But, as the tragedy gained traction around Saginaw and began to be featured on News programs such as FOX4 NEWS, people from all around the city came by and dropped off a plethora of memorial objects, almost to the point of blocking the functionality of the road ( see Figure 1.2). Most of these objects were items that could be properly categorized as child-like, such as stuffed animals. However, there were also messages and notes left for Alanna (see Figure 1.3). Some of these notes were left from members of a local church. Considering that many of the objects left were religiously affiliated with the Christian faith, it is important to note that the parents of Alanna outwardly did not claim any means of faith within the community. Although this form of memorialization through her road shrine was temporary and did not stay around forever, It lived roughly around the 3 week mark until it grew so large that it became some-what of a nuisance, blocking cars from driving through. It was with this newfound nuisance that it was seemingly taken down over night. I do not know what happened to the objects found in the

temporary memorial, but once the memorial was removed, there were no visible signs that it had been there in the first place and the physicality of the area went right back to a regular functioning mailbox and street.

For Alanna's second memorialization method, I will be discussing A permanent addition outside of her elementary school at Lake Point. After her death, her elementary school and a local motorcycle club fundraised to create a longstanding memorial. Unlike the temporary street memorial, this memorial stood to be a longstanding reminder of a young life lost, while acting productively to offer a space where children could read. This structure was built directly outside of 6 year-old Alanna's classroom. Physically, the structure is a circle built in stone, with a covering and two sets of step-like seats. In the middle is a circle (See Figure 2.1). The circular image appears to be granite, surrounded by dirt with newly planted purple flowers. The flowers turn this form of long standing memorial into a sort of living memorial. It includes a lifeform that you would have to tend and take care of just as the life of a small child like Alanna. The circle is engraved with "Don't cry because it's over, Smile because it happened", a tribute to Alanna's life cut short. As a whole, the entirety of the structure is enclosed on three sides by the red brick of the institution, almost seeming cramped and unplanned. Similar to that of the street memorial, the placement acts as a reminder that it in fact was not planned. The structure seemingly is even clear to onlookers that do not know about the memorial, that the structure of the memorial was built well after that of the school.

For my last research object I will be discussing how the social media of Kaitlyn Kotzman was used as a form of digital memorial. Kaitlyn was a close friend of mine throughout middle school and highschool, but her death came a few years later. Kaitlyn's death occurred through a car crash during her freshman year of college at Dallas Baptist University in October 2020. She

was driving with her friends and fellow Dallas Baptist students on a Sunday morning. During this drive, the car carrying both Kaitlyn and her roommate Karina De la Rosa was hit by the car of a 21 year old woman, killing them both at the age of 18 (Goldstein). Both drivers of both cars lived in this situation, but Kaitlyn and Karina did not. Considering her death was on October 4th of 2020, it puts this situation in a very interesting timeline in terms of memorialization. Seeing that it was in the midst of the Covid-19 Pandemic, it meant that for my friends and I that we could not grieve through physical options such as a funeral. Considering my friends and I did not have contact information with her parents, we had to find out information from news articles and facebook posts. She was cremated and never put in a grave site, so there was seemingly no traditional way to mourn the loss of our friend. However, what I discovered is that on her Instagram account, there are many people who chose to express grief in the only way that they could for the time period, virtually.

Specifically, for this third medium I will be discussing Kaitlyn's Instagram account and how it was used in terms of grief management in times where physical grief management was made difficult. This of course is not a physical form of grief in the sense that it was built in the same likeness of Alannas, but it was built virtually by a group of friends, family, and mutuals in the same way that any other memorial would be built. However, this memorial was formed through pixels and digital space. As far as her account goes, it pictures 9 posts pre-passing, with additional tagged pictures which consist primarily from mutuals post-death. Her most recently posted picture shows in order from left to right, a young adult who appears to be a known friend, Karina, and Kaitlyn. The picture shows the three girls with their arms around each other at what appears to be a trip to the lake. This post is captioned "Good times with good friends". Underneath this post, we are able to see comments from before her passing, almost all with

responses from Kaitlyn herself. But as we continue to read them, we see memorial posts start from right after the day of the crash. As we continue to look, these comments transition to comments that are still being received up to 3 years after the crash. We see these comments shift from initial statements such as Meghan Pottichens comment “Rest easy mama’s, thank you for always being the most kindhearted girl to me. God has gained an angel. Love you sweet girl” to an evolution of more reminiscent comments such as Aaron Travinos comment:

“I miss you, I’m still thinking of you from time to time. I wish we could talk and write music together again. I remember being in the choir practice rooms and we wrote that song using your poem. I still have it and I just listened to it again. I still look at our old messages, I can’t imagine you are still gone.”

Unlike other memorials, this specific platform allows for people to air out what they wish and their current feelings in a space where others are similarly still feeling the effects of grief. It additionally offers a platform when analyzing the outward progression of people's grief through the emotions, thoughts, and feelings that they have publicly shared. As an additional note, Kaitlyn was an avid believer in the Christian faith and was known for being a close follower of christ. This being said, it is more contextually sound for comments to bring up mentions of faith within her comments as opposed to that of Alanna Gallaghers.

Although these are the objects I will specifically be researching, it is important to contextualize these with similar popular forms of memorials. In this next section of the context description I will be describing more well-known and culturally significant memorials within modern western culture. Although these memorials will be less intimate than my research objects, I feel it is important to acknowledge them in terms of memorials and memory studies.

Living memorials “Mark the location of tragic events” and “Continue to live, intertwining their spirits with those who died at that location” (Bringham 22). Examples of this can be seen commonly in parks, where members can plant a tree in honor of a loved one. An interactive memorial on the other hand, is a memorial in which a person can physically interact with. Although these types of memorials can go hand and hand, they are two completely different methods. A good example of an interactive memorial is Berlin’s Holocaust “Field of Stelae”. This memorial consists of roughly 2,700 Concrete blocks, set in a grid-like pattern. The monument invites people to walk through, stated on their website:

“In this context, the monument tries to develop a new idea of memory that differs markedly from nostalgia. We suggest that the time of the monument, its duration, differs from the time of human experience and understanding. The traditional monument is understood by [...] what it represents. Such a monument is not understood over time, but directly in space” (Eisenman).

Meaning that the direct method of memorialization is through the experience of interaction with the monument. In Alanna’s case, the freestanding reading center works as both a living memorial due to the flowers in the center as well as an interactive memorial to its intention to have children have a space to sit and read.

Roadside shrines and memorials fall into categories of “temporary shrines”, “Spontaneous Shrines” or “Makeshift memorials”. These types of memorials fall into a form of public grief that more commonly happens after a more sudden, or tragic death (Maynor). However, it was with Princess Diana’s death in 1997 that these types of memorials are first noted as being polarized (Magry 1). This new collective form of memorialization generally takes place in a very public place related to the death of the subject, and becomes a sort of hodge-podge of

collective memory such as seen in Princess Diana's case. Unlike interactive memorials that are generally planned and meant to be experienced, Temporary memorials have a short life span, and come to fruition solely through group effort and are only maintained and kept alive by those who contribute to them.

Lastly, we have a more modern form of grief, which falls under the category of web memorials. In western culture, we are seeing more and more occurrences of digital legacy through death. By focusing on social media specifically, it shows a much more raw and intimate example than something that is made to be shown off. Social media platforms of those deceased not only-

“ expands the grieving experience. It provides a space for those that are not comfortable being vulnerable in front of other people and an opportunity for those that are far away in distance and those not a part of the immediate family to feel connected to others that know the deceased person.” (Sharpe 9).

This being said, this medium is important to include within this paper both because it is the easiest to access and maintain, while being the most newfound occurrence out of the three.

### **Initial Conclusions**

Altogether, I initially conclude that different methods of memorialization will highlight different expressions of grief through their mediums and also intend to create findings based on the connection of grief and its correlation to the memorials level of maintenance. For example, whereas something such as a virtual memorial is something you can choose to enter, leave and interact as you please, it shows a different means of grief compared to that of something like A roadside shrine within close proximity to those grieving. Where as the virtual example is



something that you can choose to maintain, and put to the back of your mind as you please, the roadside example was in a way inescapable to those who lives close to the memorial such as myself. It is with these 3 mediums of memorials that I hope to answer the following questions over the course of my paper:

- How do these different mediums of memorials/gravesites contribute to symbolic expressions of grief through the placement/displacement of the physical site?
- How do these methods reflect the priorities of those grieving/creating/maintaining the Memoriam sites?
- How do the dynamics of grief change when comparing high-commitment memorials, like the street shrine of Alanna Gallagher, with lower-commitment forms such as digital expressions on social media?

“I have acted with honesty and integrity in producing this work and am unaware of anyone who has not”- Lauren Wise

## Figures

Figure 1.1



Figure 1.2



Figure 1.3

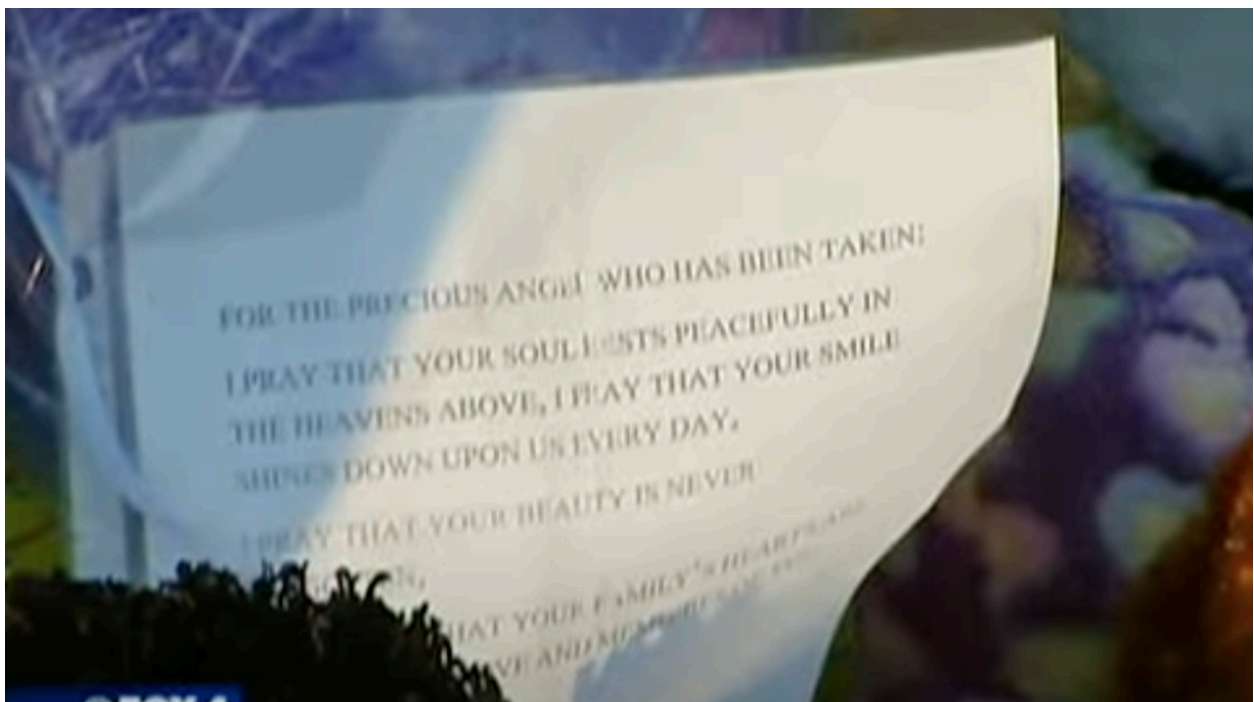


Figure 2.1



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