



Entrance to Marshall University with Old Main (the oldest part of the building was built in 1868) in the background. Photo by Jim Workman.

The Legacy Continues

By Stan Bumgardner

I started at Marshall in August 1983. Not quite 18, it was my first extended stay from home—albeit only 50 miles away—and my first experience at having a modicum of independence. I lived on the 13th floor (no, they didn't skip 13) of the Towers East dorm in a room a former resident had christened "The Swamp," in honor of Hawkeye Pierce's

grungy Army tent on the show *M*A*S*H*. I did my share to uphold that tradition.

At the time, I loved to read history for fun, never dreaming I'd someday make a meager living at it. A series of great professors at Marshall and later West Virginia University clearly showed me how little I really knew or could ever understand about history.

I was aware of the 1970 plane crash but didn't know much about it. As with most eighth-graders who took West Virginia history back then, our school year ended about the time we got to 1900. So, I knew stories about the frontier, the Civil War, and our convoluted Statehood Movement but very little about 20th-century West Virginia history.

I still remember my first day at Marshall, walking across campus to Smith Hall, where most of my classes were held. I recall three things very distinctly: 1. The other students all looked like they were twice my age. 2. All the coffee on campus tasted like it'd been brewed by Cam Henderson himself in the 1930s. 3. To get to nearly any class, I had to pass by the Marshall Memorial Fountain.

I knew why the fountain was there and eventually what each part symbolized, namely the 75 spires at the top. But I don't remember talking much about the crash with fellow students. It just didn't come up in my circles.

Even at football games, played in a crumbling Fairfield Stadium before sparse (to put it mildly) crowds, the crash wasn't mentioned in the 1980s. As noted elsewhere in this edition, school leaders had seriously considered disbanding the entire football program due to a slew of losing seasons but also, perhaps, to distance the university farther from an unspeakable tragedy.

When it really hit home for me was in my freshman speech class. We had to get up in front of other students and recite a speech we'd written. Being not quite 18 and living in "The Swamp," I was full of Hawkeye Pierce's sarcasm (and still am). I delivered what I thought was a funny talk about making a peanut butter sandwich. It was all tongue-in-cheek, and I got a few chuckles. Sitting beside me was Courtney Proctor (now Cross), who was up next. Courtney followed up my irreverent presentation about sandwich-making with a speech about how it felt to lose both her parents, Herbert

Dickerson Proctor and Josephine Courtney Phillips Proctor, in the plane crash when she was only six years old. To say the least, I was quite embarrassed by my speech and very humbled by hers.

In that moment, I realized how closely Marshall and Huntington were intertwined. This wasn't just a tragic event from 13 years before; it was a pivotal moment that had changed lives forever and left a very sad but lasting legacy for the school. The crash wasn't part of the ancient past.

It took me time, but I eventually recognized that the fountain was sacred ground and that *The 75* would never be forgotten. As the Rev. Steve Harvey, current football team chaplain, notes of the fountain's design, "75 spires rise toward the heavens."

Yet, other than the fountain, I didn't see much public acknowledgment of the crash or *The 75*. I recently spoke with some friends from that time. Their recollection was similar. But, I wondered, was that just because of who we were? Specifically, I mostly hung out with friends I already knew from Charleston, the denizens of a good local Tex-Mex eatery with cheap beer called Hulio's, and the people I met in the dorms, mostly students from Jackson, Logan, and Mason counties, but few Huntingtonians.

So, I contacted my cousin Myra, who started at Marshall a few years before me. She remembers a different experience because she lived in a sorority house. Myra's friends at the sorority talked about the crash a lot because many of her sisters were from Huntington and knew someone, directly or indirectly, on the plane. She and her friends cried every November 14 when the fountain was turned off because they understood the profound significance of the moment: 75 people who died far too early in life.

She also had a friend who took her up to the "J School" (School of Journalism). In Myra's recollection, the J School's "hallway was pretty much a tribute to the crash and the families who lost loved ones."



Color guard at the 2019 Marshall Memorial Service. Red Dawson, an assistant coach who missed the plane flight in 1970 to make a side recruiting trip, is wearing a chapeau with his hand over his heart in the front row. All photos by Steve Brightwell unless noted otherwise.

Just imagine, in a city of nearly 75,000 residents in 1970, nearly everyone in Huntington knew one of *The 75* or knew somebody who knew one of them. While Huntington isn't technically a small town, it still has that "Small Town, West Virginia" vibe, and relationships are tightly knit.

Last year, our photographer, Steve Brightwell, and I went to the 49th annual Memorial Service. From the services in the 1980s, I recall only a small smattering of people around the fountain each year on November 14. On November 14, 2019, though, hundreds showed up. Speakers included the university president, current students, and leaders of the athletic department such as Athletic Director Mike Hamrick and a genuinely emotional football Head Coach Doc Holliday. Then, Dr. Matthew Ralsten paid tribute to his

parents, Murrill and Helen Ralsten, both of whom were killed in the crash. Members of the school band and chorus performed as hundreds sat or stood in hushed silence. This was a very different type of service than what I remembered.

Steve and I—planning for this issue of the magazine—wanted to take some photos of key locations related to the crash. After the service, Marshall student Buffy Six took us on a tour of relevant places, primarily the actual crash site and the graves of players, identified and unidentified, at Spring Hill Cemetery. Everywhere we went, people were already there, reading the highway historical marker at the crash site or paying homage in the cemetery. That's where we met Sheila Nash, sister of Brad Nash, one of the six bodies never identified. She was holding vigil at the cemetery's memorial.



Marshall student Buffy Six, originally from Braxton County, and her friends volunteered to help clean up the Marshall plane crash site before the 2019 Memorial Service.

A couple of things quickly became apparent to me. For one, the whole city and the Marshall community embraced the legacy of the crash much more than I recall from nearly 40 years ago. But another thing struck me even more. Here was a bright, affable 22-year-old student, Buffy Six, who understood the legacy of *The 75* better than I ever have.

Buffy grew up in Sutton and graduated from Braxton County High School in 2016. Following in the footsteps of her mom, Janet Six, Buffy wanted to attend Marshall. As a proud daughter of Marshall, Buffy learned about the crash and its significance from her mom but really got interested after *We Are Marshall* came out.

But the deciding factor for her was during a visit to Marshall while still in high school: “[I] was able to sit next to the fountain. I could feel just how much those 75 people meant

to the whole community, not just Marshall. People see Marshall as just a university, and I used to before I learned the history. Marshall is more than classrooms, dining halls, and dorm rooms. It’s a community that suffered a great loss but came together stronger and full of love for one another. Even if you didn’t personally know any of *The 75*, you are almost guaranteed to meet a family member, roommate, or friend on campus.”

Since enrolling in Marshall in fall 2016, she’s never missed a Memorial Service. She and her friends started looking around and decided more could be done to honor *The 75*. The actual crash site and highway historical marker is located on a lonely dead-end stretch of road near Tri-State Airport. Despite the importance of the place, its remote locale has made it a natural party site. So, in 2019, the weekend before the Memorial Service, Buffy



Buffy Six (right) talks with Sheila Nash at Spring Hill Cemetery, November 14, 2019. Sheila's brother Brad was killed in the crash and was one of the six players never identified.

rounded up some fellow students “to clean up the crash site before the families came to visit for the anniversary. Months before, I’d visited the site with my mom, and we noticed the amount of trash alongside the road and that the Marshall flag was tattered. I talked to Ginny Painter [the school’s senior vice president for Communications & Marketing]. We were able to get the physical plant to replace the mulch, greenery, and flags, while I and four other students cleaned up the roadside trash. I wanted the site to look as best as it could for the families, and I wanted them to know that current students who never knew their loved ones still care. I wanted them to know that as a part of the Marshall family, they will always be loved, and they will always have a place to call home.”

Listening to Buffy talk proudly and emotionally about the crash’s legacy got me thinking about *sympathy* vs. *empathy*. In my day at Marshall, we were certainly sympathetic to those who’d lost loved ones. Who wouldn’t be? But, in my day, I don’t think I ever felt the empathy that Buffy and her fellow students feel toward each and every one of *The 75*. No matter what happens the rest of our lives, Marshall students and alumni will always have a bond—“the glue,” as Pat Daugherty calls it—because of *The 75*. It’s much like having a family. If you’re like me, you often forget family members’ birthdays or anniversaries. But, for the remainder of my days, I and anyone ever associated with Marshall will never forget November 14 and what it represents.

Buffy expresses this sentiment much better than I can: “Going to visit the memorial and the cemetery is more than just paying respect. It’s putting yourself in the families’ shoes and feeling that loss. It’s something that most of us could never imagine. Parents didn’t just lose a son; they also lost his friends, who’d probably had dinner at their table. They lost his mentors, who would’ve consoled them

when they were experiencing homesickness. They lost a whole gained family. Being someone from a small town, I know how much sports families bond together. It’s more than supporting your child on the sidelines. It’s planning end-of-season barbecues, it’s babysitting younger siblings, it’s maybe even spending Thanksgiving together. [The crash] wasn’t just about losing a son, but an entire family. For some, it was their only family. Going to the service, visiting the crash site, sitting by the fountain, it’s all a part of knowing and understanding that type of loss. In a way, it’s what drives me to be a better student. Those players didn’t get their diplomas. They didn’t finish finals. They didn’t apply for jobs. They didn’t get the chance. And now, as a student, walking the same campus and the same halls, they deserve that I do my best and study my hardest.”

I wish I would’ve appreciated this feeling more when I was at Marshall or that I had anywhere near Buffy’s wisdom at age 22 (or now, for that matter). “*Walking the same campus and the same halls, they deserve that I do my best and study my hardest.*” That remark displays a level of empathy I still strive for. Thank goodness for Buffy and her generation. She reminds me of a favorite quote by Franz Kafka: “Youth is happy because it has the capacity to see beauty. Anyone who keeps the ability to see beauty never grows old.”

Buffy and her colleagues feel a sense of responsibility to *The 75* that I never fully grasped in my youth. History is filled with life lessons that can guide and inspire us, but how many of us just miss them as they pass by? Fortunately for us, for Marshall, and for Huntington, young people such as Buffy Six understand those lessons that I somehow missed. Down deep, I feel much better and relieved when I realize the legacy of *The 75* is now in the hands of young people who truly empathize. 🍂