

## The Power of Remembering

### MARTHA SHANNEN REID MEMORIAL

AUSTIN, TEXAS

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It's impossible to describe how devastated the schoolmates of Martha Shannen Reid were when she died in a car accident at the age of 12. Counselors were brought to the school to help the students cope, and after the initial shock, her friends organized a balloon release. On that day, everyone wrote notes to Martha Shannen or anyone else they held dear and attached them to white helium balloons. All together, they let the balloons go and watched them rise to the clear-blue sky, then disappear.

But they could not let go of their sadness.

"They were primary in my thoughts even just a couple of days after the wreck," said Kate Reid, Martha Shannen's mother. "I just cannot tell you how miserable they were. A lot of them have never even had a grandparent die."

As part of their grieving process, the Reid's supportive network of friends in Austin, Texas, began to talk about ways to memorialize Martha Shannen. Her father, Randal, who was injured in the crash, tried to process his grief by riding an adapted bike along Lady Bird Lake. As he rode, he saw benches with plaques honoring loved ones. He and Kate had already decided to buy a bench when they learned that members of the community were conceptualizing a memorial garden at West Ridge Middle School, where Martha Shannen had been a popular student. The school gave permission to dedicate a small space on the school grounds to Martha Shannen.

The garden project was organized by Jordan McCullough, whose efforts fulfilled the community-service and fund-raising requirements he needed to advance from Boy Scout to Eagle Scout.

Donating her time, landscape architect Sue Lambe designed a simple garden plot with drought-resistant plants. There's also a redbud tree, because Martha Shannen always remarked on their beauty. Ted's Trees in Austin donated the tree.

When it came to furnishings, the Reids turned to Debbie and Charles Finch of the Paul E. Allen Co. of Flower Mound, Texas. They are Texas representatives of site furnishings manufacturer DuMor Inc., based in Mifflintown, Pa.

Kate Reid had difficulty choosing the two matching benches that would be the garden's focal point. Her mind was still reeling with memories of things that would never happen again.

Reid recalled that Debbie Finch once spent upwards of an hour on the phone with her, zeroing in on the perfect benches. There were steel, recycled plastic and wooden ones; ornate and plain ones; and colors galore.

Though it surprised some folks who were expecting school colors or

perhaps something more subdued, the Reids chose two sleek cast-iron benches in bright red, along with a black planter.

"I liked the look of them, and they are really comfortable," Kate Reid said.

Red was Martha Shannen's favorite color. She was buried in her red jeans because she would have liked that. Designing the garden, Lambe was sure to include some red flowering plants, such as cherry sage and yucca.

The red benches provide for a nice contrast against green elements of the school's exterior. A plaque on each bench pays tribute to the girl who played French horn, had a soft spot for animals and aspired to be a fashion designer. One says, "In honor of our friend and band member." The other has lyrics from a Jonas Brothers song: "When you look me in the eyes, I catch a glimpse of heaven."

Martha Shannen claimed to love the Jonas Brothers more than anyone else on the planet. The Jonas Brothers were even mentioned in her obituary, along with other things she enjoyed, such as chili con queso and the TV series "Project Runway."

Normally, the Finches have someone else deliver site furnishings, but because Debbie Finch had gotten to know Kate Reid over the phone and knew the harrowing details surrounding her loss, she wanted to deliver them personally. Charles Finch installed the benches, which weigh about 400 pounds. Charles Finch's installation experience and elbow grease were offered for free.

"We're a really small company, but we were extremely happy to be able to help with the installation," Debbie Finch said, adding that a few tears were shed when the garden was completed, about a year after the March 2008 car accident.

Community members have since suggested that a Martha Shannen Reid memorial garden be created at the elementary school from which she graduated, because the younger siblings of Martha Shannen's friends also were traumatized by her death. This time, the memorial will be part of a larger garden several mothers are planting on the school grounds to teach kids about growing food and tending plants. And it will be especially meaningful because Martha Shannen's older brother, Jack, has undertaken the project for his Eagle Scout eligibility.

There will be at least one bench, meaning the Reids will have at least one more opportunity to try to sum up their daughter's wonderful, music-filled, too-short life on a little gold-tone plaque.

Something profound might be in order. But what about the everyday things? What about her love of the outdoors? What about how naturally and often she smiled, as though it were her default facial expression?

She loved animals and wanted to save the polar bears.

She loved volleyball, dancing and writing.

She wanted to write a novel. She wanted to study fashion design in London. She wanted to be the next American Idol.

But plaques on benches are too small to list all of those. Those memories must be spoken, and in either of Martha Shannen's two memorial gardens, her friends and family will have a tranquil place to do so.

## INFORMATION

West Ridge Middle School: [wrms.eanes.k12.tx.us](http://wrms.eanes.k12.tx.us)

DuMor Inc.: [www.dumor.com](http://www.dumor.com)