

Columbine crosses prompt Baptist youths' reflections

by Joni Hannigan

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ATLANTA (BP)--Squatting for a closer look at the face of Isaiah Shoels, a young boy rubbed his hand gingerly across the weather-beaten photograph attached to a wooden cross.

The original 13 crosses memorializing the victims of the April 20 school shootings in Littleton, Colo., were on display in the same area of Atlanta's Centennial Olympic Park as inscriptions remembering the tragic explosion there during the 1996 summer Olympic games.

"Do not cry. You are with God now," the boy mouthed silently, tracing his index finger along the words in black marker stretching down the length of the cross memorializing Shoels.

Moments before, the excited youngster had run ahead of his family to check out the "Family Fest" amusement park games, face painting, balloon displays and other Crossover Metro Atlanta events coordinated by the North American Mission Board, including a contemporary Christian music concert. The Crossover evangelistic thrust precedes the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting, June 15-16, at the Georgia Dome.

Now, seeing the reality of the crosses and their meaning, the boy's mood appeared to have turned thoughtful.

"It's really sad," said Cynthia Givens, the boy's 17-year-old cousin and a student at Heirway Christian Academy, Douglasville, Ga. "Nobody deserves to die like that. We all have to go anyway, but not like that."

"God is in [our school], " Givens said, "and the angels are in charge over us."

That's precisely the intended message of Greg Zanis, the Aurora, Ill., carpenter who created the crosses.

"I make crosses to help people heal and to remind them that Jesus gives peace and grace," he said in an interview. Zanis builds crosses for families of victims of violent

crimes who request them from across the country and then personally delivers the crosses in his pick-up truck.

He drew national media attention after two of the 15 crosses he set up on a hill in Clement Park near Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., were torn down and destroyed by Brian Rohrbough, the father of one of the victims, 15-year-old Daniel Rohrbough. The elder Rohrbough destroyed the crosses representing gunmen Eric Harris, 18, and Dylan Klebold, 17.

Zanis and Rohrbough reconciled after Zanis explained his actions.

The two 6'3" crosses in dispute were similar to the other 13, except for one important distinction that most overlooked. He said he used Greek letters to spell out the names of Harris and Klebold because, historically, the Greeks were non-believers.

Zanis said Greek was his first language. He learned it from his father, who founded the St. Athanasios Greek Orthodox Church in Aurora, Ill.

Zanis, a middle-aged self-employed carpenter, attends an evangelical Baptist church with his wife and five children.

The Illinois layman said he built and placed the crosses near Columbine High School to show the Littleton community that the whole country cares for them and seeks peace for even the friends and families of the killers. But his message may have been misunderstood.

Identified after his Illinois license plate was traced, Zanis was thrust into the spotlight despite his desire to remain anonymous. He made three trips in two weeks to place the crosses, remove the originals after the two were destroyed and then put up a new set. After taking down the original crosses, Zanis said he was not prepared for the hundreds of requests to return them. He quickly obliged and crafted a set to replace the originals.

Zanis said the second set of crosses now resides in a federal warehouse after being confiscated by officials who said a permanent display infringes on laws concerning the separation of church and state.

Zanis now carts the original crosses around the country as a traveling display in locations where people gather to memorialize those who have been victims of violent crimes.

Accepting no contributions, Zanis said he believes the Columbine tragedy has become a focal point that will bring the country to its knees.

“This is an incredible gift from God,” said one of the volunteers, Chris Bryant, who carried a cross into Centennial Park in Atlanta.

Bryant is a student at DeKalb College and a member of Philadelphia Baptist Church, Conyers, Ga. His sister just graduated from Heritage High School in Conyers, site of another school shooting several weeks earlier.

“It makes you think of how it can happen to anyone,” sighed Bryant, wiping his eyes. “I told Mr. Zanis I’m glad he didn’t have to meet me with a cross.”