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New avenues for memorial tributes

Parks need trees and benches, and that's what more mourners are providing in memory of their loved ones.

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Grieving has changed.

Rather than spending thousands of dollars on a gravestone, people increasingly are opting to remember loved ones by donating a park bench, a tree in a public place or some other practical, enduring and happy remembrance.

On Sunday, 100 family and friends of Al Spellmire gathered in Irvine's Northwood Park to dedicate a memorial bench to him. The bench is shaded by eucalyptus trees and overlooks soccer fields where he once played. The 18-year-old died July 12 from heat exhaustion after his car sunk into loose sand while he was off-roading in the Mojave Desert.

"This park was one of his favorite places," said Travis Gyarmaty, one of Spellmire's friends.

After a hymn, some prayers and short eulogies from family and friends, Gyarmaty and others took turns sitting on the bench, which is inscribed with Spellmire's name and a quotation he chose for his senior yearbook.

Spellmire's bench illustrates how American attitudes and practices on grieving are changing. It's the first memorial bench at the park but Heritage Park, also in Irvine, has five such benches.

"It's growing, oh, yes," said Maja Becker, office manager for the Wakefield Co. in Irvine, which supplied the Spellmire bench and also makes tables, barbecues, bike racks and other equipment for public places, all of which can be donated. "It gives people a sense of peace and closure," she said of the benches and other public fixtures. "They also see it as a way to give back to the community."

Families say it also helps them remember someone's life joyously; something a marble gravestone or metal marker cannot.

To remember the supremely practical, Wakefield and other companies also make elegant steel boxes and concrete containers that look like planters but instead cover trashcans. Plaques can be affixed to make them memorials in public places.

It used to be only the rich, the powerful and the victorious who could be remembered with a plaque in a public place, monument in the park or their name on a building. And such memorials might cost tens of thousands of dollars.

But trees at park-planting size cost about \$50; benches start at about \$600.

Governments at every level are learning that the memorials can help them improve public places in ways their budgets won't allow.

Costa Mesa, for example, has three memorial benches and about 25 memorial trees. And at least 200 trees in county parks have been planted in memory of loved ones, all testament to a practical way that ordinary people can honor loved ones. Cities and counties are happy to help people grieve with such donations.

"It's a positive," said Tim Miller, superintendent of the county Harbors, Beaches and Parks Division. "We get a tree and the family gets a memorial. It's a way that cities can relate directly with people."

Trees shading the train station in Irvine all were donated as memorials.

Typically, family, friends or an organization will buy the tree and park staff will plant it.

Some cities deal with the requests informally, but the growing interest likely will induce more formal procedures. Westminster, for example, said its tree dedication program has become so popular it averages one new tree a week.

The Internet also is contributing to changes in memorializing.

Send search engines looking for "memorials," and thousands of Web sites appear, some expressly for mourners to post pictures and testimonials to loved ones.

Experts say the pressures and swiftness of change in modern life is part of the reason people are drawn to public remembrances for loved ones.

"People are looking for important values to hang onto," said Ray Young, associate dean of the College of Humanities at California State University, Fullerton.

Public remembrances symbolize people's quest for "sacred places," which used to be confined to churches, Young noted.

Now, he said, people are looking for commemorations in new and different places.

And the scale of remembrance is different.

Many communities have monuments to wars, but people now are focusing more on specific individuals, Young and others note. A memorial proposed in Irvine would include reference to every American who died in Iraq.

Whether the memorial is a grove of trees, benches, tables or something else, such places provide a "place where people can hang onto memories," says Young. In such places, says the Rev. Steve Sallot, who led the service for Spellmire on Sunday, people can "grieve with hope."

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