

A Legacy of Love: The Good Shepherd Statue

By Becky Williamson-Martin
Standing in line at the Dollar General in Samantha was no entertaining at times, and this particular day was no exception. I overheard a couple of fellas who had not seen each other since high school catching up. "Hey man, where are you living now?" "Oh, I live about one mile down that road in front of the Jesus statue." I thought about that conversation on my way home and as I turned into my drive I stopped at the statue in my yard and thought about the story behind this local landmark.

After the death of his mother in February of 1998, my Daddy, Johnny Williamson, was inspired to create a representation of the 23rd Psalm. It was his mother's favorite scripture. A cypress log was chosen for The Good Shepherd Statue because of the longstanding belief that the Cypress is the "gopher wood" (or kopher, which is the Hebrew word for waterproof) that Noah used to build the ark. Daddy worked alongside his longtime friend and local artist/sculptor, Willie Logan, to carve the 6-1/2 foot statue of The Good Shepherd.

It's sort of amusing how you can become so accustomed to something that you no longer see it, or think about it. This statue has just been part of the normal landscape in my Daddy's yard for years. But, about two years ago, I started noticing it, when I would visit my Daddy. I developed a desire to know and understand what he saw, what his intentions were, and how he viewed The Good Shepherd Statue.

I began to ask questions, and we spent hours sitting in the rockers on Daddy's front porch, shelling peas or peeling apples, as he tried to teach me. You see, my father was a great teacher, but he didn't just simply give you all the answers. He was a deep thinker, and that is what he wanted me to do: think about it, ponder on it, dig for it, and come to know on my own. Local newspapers had done some articles in the past on the statue, and I dug them up. He told those reporters, "The Statue is a testimony of my faith. It isn't meant to be an idol. You don't worship it, but it gets people to think and do good deeds." Hmm. Good deeds. Well, I had certainly seen him do many good deeds over the course of my life. Time and time again, I saw my daddy give to others. He was selfless. I don't recall ever hearing him say he wanted anything. Giving to others was always on his mind. And somehow, he managed to know what their needs were. A friend told me a few days ago, "Your daddy was like a magnet. You just wanted to be around him."

Daddy had a heart attack in March of last year and died four months later. I had the privilege of living in his house with him during those four months.

During many long nights, when he couldn't sleep, he talked intently about life, pouring story after story into my heart and my life that I will never forget. A few weeks after his death, I was looking through his books and found *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* by Phillip Keller. I could feel my daddys big hands on the book as I opened it. Reading this book helped me connect the dots of what daddy had tried to tell me and it gave me an new understanding of *The Good Shepherd*.

More than 600 people attended my father's wake and funeral. One man came who had never even met daddy. He said he had heard so much about him, he had to come. We heard story after story from his friends and acquaintances about acts of giving to others. In one story, Daddy actually took the shirt off that he was wearing, and gave it to someone in need. In the days following the funeral, more than one person told me, "You know there are people in this area who are going to go hungry now that your daddy is gone." ggWWell, that is a statement that you cannot get out of your head.

At the recommendation of several of daddy's friends, and with a burning desire to continue his legacy, my three brothers, my sister, and I started the Johnny Williamson Good Shepherd Foundation. Our purpose is Galatians 6:10: *Therefore, as we have opportunity let us do good to all especially to those of the household of faith.* This is the scripture chosen by the minister to describe Daddy, as "Mr. Johnny always saw and took the opportunity." Our mission through the Foundation is to continue the legacy of love for others, by providing support and assistance of daily essentials to individuals and families in the Samantha and surrounding communities.

We are having a community celebration and fundraiser on Saturday, April 19, which was daddy's birthday, and we plan to make it an annual event. Daddy called our family gatherings "a party." He loved to be with his family and friends, and gatherings always included food and, very often, music. So we hope to create such an event in his memory: The Good Shepherd Legacy of Love Festival. Everyone is invited! Our plans are to build an official food pantry in Samantha, a place where anyone who needs a hand-up can come for food or other assistance.

To learn more about this special event, or about The Good Shepherd Foundation, call us at (205) 233-3794. You can also visit our website at www.johnnywilliamsongoodshepherdfoundation.com or our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/TheGoodShepherdStatueatPawpawJohns.



Back row, left to right: Phyllis Olive, Becky Williamson, Larry Williamson, Ricky Williamson, Ken Williamson.
Front row: Doris and Johnny Williamson.



The Good Shepherd Statue stands tall along U.S. Highway 43.

Photos: Becky Williamson-Martin