

## Bereaved families Of Cape Breton

### A Monument Of Love

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Whether due to sudden tragedy or terminal illness, we are all pathetically ill equipped to deal with the irreversible decisions we must make in the days immediately following the death of someone dear to us.

On the snowy, January morning after our son, Mark, died, my husband picked out a specific burial location from cemetery sites we had purchased years before. Under the pressures of fresh grief and immediate need, George was not aware that he had chosen a row where only flat markers are permitted.

When the time came to choose a permanent marker, I drove over to the memorial showroom where I was immediately drawn to the black granite stones. They were done in a process I had never seen that was referred to as either “etching” or “engraving,” and they allowed artwork of a much finer and more elaborate detail than the more traditional “cutting” method. The owner said it was a relatively new process, very expensive, and had not existed long enough for anyone to be sure of its lasting quality. He strongly advised against an “etched” stone where it had to be installed flat, with its surface exposed to the worst weather conditions.

As I touched the elaborate engraving work and marveled at it, Mark’s friend, Robbie, who had accompanied me, said, “You could do that.” But instead, I listened to all the reasons it would not be practical and settled for a black marker done in traditional cutting. I insisted on a deer scene, as Mark was an avid hunter. While some of the etched stones had deer scenes in breathtaking detail, I was assured that I would be just as pleased with one done in the cutting method.

Skeptical, I kept returning to the showroom to see the design in process. Since I am supersensitive to criticism of my own artwork, I am always reluctant to criticize another artist—but I was unhappy. I called the owner and told him the deer was not right. I returned to see slight changes; still not what I wanted. Finally they sent me home with paper to draw my own deer. I returned it promptly, and went home feeling slightly more optimistic.

Before we knew it, the stone was installed and we rushed over to the cemetery to see it. I was speechless. The entire surface had been sandblasted; Mark’s black stone was gray. The deer looked like a cow. We went shopping, and then went back. It hadn’t changed; it was still ugly. After phone calls, shouting and tears, the owner finally met us at the cemetery and agreed it wasn’t right. However, he pointed out to me that since I didn’t like seeing my son’s cemetery marker, I’d probably never be happy with anything! He made one

sensible suggestion; “You like upright stones, move Mark to another row.” So we did. It was done very smoothly and we never had a pang of doubt. The first site had never been right anyway. We hadn’t even been able to get grass to grow there. It was then that we asked the monument company gentleman if I could do the design work myself.

“How would you learn?” he asked incredulously.

“By observing,” I replied, “And you could give me scraps to practice on.”

“Impossible,” was his reply.

It was also what the odds were that we had any further dealings with this company! I spoke to our funeral director, and he advised me to look around, see which stones we liked and who did them. Again and again, we were impressed with work from Steckman’s, so we called for an appointment. By then, I was determined to convince them to teach me the process. I would etch Mark’s stone. Armed with my best examples of black and white artwork, we walked in, ready for an argument. George explained that we wanted a black granite, upright marker, and, he said, “She wants to do the etching.”

Kip Steckman smiled.

“I’m a real artist,” I blurted, “See, I did these.”

When he looked at them, he said if I had done these, I could probably do the etching. The first step was to observe their etching specialist at work. Bob Hall lives in Indiana, and drives his Winnebago through a seven state area, doing his work. In his late twenties, he was someone I liked immediately. He could have been a friend one of my boys might have brought home. He is incredibly talented and unbelievably generous.

I’ve never been a “performance” artist. I dislike strangers watching me work, so I was reluctant to invade Bob’s space, trying to observe while standing off and remaining unobtrusive.

“You’ll have to move closer if you’re going to learn this,” he said. Explaining as we went, my son, Denny, and I watched and questioned. I told him I’d already purchased a tool, but when I explained what it was, he informed me that it was “no good—a piece of junk.” He ran over to his supply case, dug around, and handed me a duplicate of the tool he was using.

“When can I get this back to you...How?” I stammered.

“Keep it,” he said, and closed the discussion with a wave of his hand.

Steckman's gave me irregular pieces of stone, some chipped or broken, some cut from larger pieces. We selected pictures of Mark doing things he had loved. I did two practice renderings, one of the boxing picture, one of the football picture. Steckman's was very impressed and said when I was ready; they'd send the stone over in a few days. White-knuckle time! George had built me a steel-supported table with rigged lights. All systems were go.

I began with the hunting scene. Since I had no picture for reference, I had to fake that. I included snow (because Mark loved snow), and a majestic eight-point buck. Now, Mark never brought home an eight-point buck, but I defy anybody to tell me he never saw one! On one side, I used a scene near our camp, a mountain road where Mark and George walked to hunt. In the lower corner, I put a tree stump surrounded by a wild profusion of foliage. Next, I created the scuba scene drawn from a picture his friend had taken when the dove in Cuba. He and Jim were training to qualify for Navy Seal schooling. Then I went on to the football picture and the boxing one. To the script lettering of our name I had added the phrase, "Forever Young," from the Bob Dylan song I'd used as an inscription on the cards at the funeral home. To include his brother, I added lines from a poem I found in Rose Kennedy's book. "You trod the golden paths of youth, then left the world and youth behind." These words are engraved on the flat ledge of the base. The face portrait was last. The day I finished that, I cried for hours, partly from relief, partly because the work had been so important to me, and now it was done—and it was forever.

Mark's grave has had many visitors since the stone was installed, many friends, and some strangers. Denny called to tell me he met seventeen people one day when he visited the grave.

The next time Bob Hall was in the area, we invited him to see the finished stone. It was dark when we got there, but we used a flashlight. He loved it—and I knew it was now all okay. I didn't get to see Mark's life evolve as I'd hoped, and I'd heard a million negatives in the year he was sick. This time, it was going to be the way we wanted—period.

The things I love best about the stone probably aren't the things others would notice. People comment on how I achieved the ribbed effects on Mark's elbow pads in the football picture—but I love his hands. Others marvel that you can actually read "Everlast" on his boxing glove—but I love his profile, framed by the headgear. I love the mischief in his eyes as he swam in Cuba (the breathtaking apparatus does not permit a smile, but his eyes are laughing). They are happy, too, in the large portrait. The three daisies around the stump represent Denny, George and me. I always signed my work—this time I added the word, "Mom."

Former Pennsylvania Governor Casey wrote: *“The true depth of sorrow is rarely reached, except when one has searched one’s own soul to find uncompromising, unconditional love, and following that discovery, has that special love snatched away. I believe you found that special love in your relationship with your son, Mark. And unlike most people, you have been able to garner those energies to create a lifetime tribute to him. The loss of a child is an indescribable tragedy. Yet, you have found a way to express your grief and love in the etchings of Mark’s life on granite. Through your work, all of your family has been able to find a measure of solace. And even those who thought your missions impossible have now learned that a parent’s love, uncompromising and unconditional, has no boundaries.”*

I always say we are made up of factions—I am my mother’s daughter, my sister’s sister, George’s wife, Denny’s mom, and Monica’s grandma. In each capacity there are things to do. I can buy Denny a shirt I know he’d like, or recommend a good book, or give him a hug—those are “mom” things. I’m still Mark’s mother, but the need to express that part of me is harder to fulfill. This stone? Well it’s a “mom” thing.