

*Eberly: Consider an educational memorial for UT Tower shootings*

By Rosa Eberly - Special to the American-Statesman

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News that the University of Texas is supporting a significant memorial to victims of the 1966 Tower shootings arrived on my desk here in Pennsylvania from, in my estimation, the best possible source: a former student.

That student is Erin Rae Osenbaugh, who was enrolled in the final section of a course I taught at UT for several years, “The UT Tower and Public Memory.”

I’ve devoted my career to helping students learn, through courses in rhetoric and civic engagement, that they have agency.

Students in my classes practice collaboratively identifying, analyzing, deliberating, and, in some cases, acting on public problems so that they might sustain those behaviors after they graduate and help keep what remains of participatory democracy alive.

As I routinely tell students in my classes, “We can talk about difficult things. We have to. It’s the best hope we have.”

When, as a new assistant professor at UT, I listened to KLBJ-AM on the 29th anniversary of the shootings, it seemed from the phone calls that people’s memories of Aug. 1, 1966, had nowhere to go other than talk radio. As a UT police officer told the Texas Monthly a year later, “The university just wishes the whole thing would go away.”

With the support of Lester Faigley and John Ruszkiewicz, my department heads, and Sheldon Ekland-Olson, dean of the College of Liberal Arts, I built a rhetoric course around individual, institutional and public memories of the university’s most terrible moment, focusing in part on the Tower itself, a building that made horrible memories material for many survivors of the 1966 shootings and the suicides that have occurred from the observation deck over four decades.

The course was motivated in part by the inscription on the base of the Main Building itself. The inscription’s source is the Gospel of John, the most pluralist of the gospels. I took from the inscription courage to help facilitate difficult conversations: “Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.”

After Osenbaugh and I got back in touch via Twitter, she sent me a direct message — “Not sure if you’ve seen this yet” — with a link to KTBC-TV’s coverage of the story under the headline, “UT Tower Shooting survivors creating long-overdue memorial.”

Like many other students participating in sections of the class, Osenbaugh devoted her research and writing to the question of whether there should be a memorial. Among one of the more difficult questions was, beyond the fatalities, who precisely constituted a victim and by what definitional criteria. What seems clear in listening to people who were on campus or who lost children or best friends that day is that victimage takes manifold forms.

Students in the first two sections of the Tower class usually devoted their attention to lack of access to the observation deck of the Tower, closed to visitors from the mid-1970s until 1999, after a stainless steel cage was built around it to prevent suicides.

In spring semester of 1999, anticipating the re-opening of the observation deck, students returned to the question of a memorial, with several researching the figures outside our classroom building, including statues of Jefferson Davis and Woodrow Wilson, and asking questions about institutional values and priorities. That those two statues have been removed from the South Mall sends a message about UT's values and willingness to make hard choices.

In every section of the course, from 1996 to 2001, students and I wondered whether a memorial to the Tower shootings would somehow become a shrine to the perpetrator. In the decades of institutional silence and repression after the 1966 shootings, cultural texts celebrated the perpetrator as a cruel, cool antihero.

I remain agnostic about the value and function of a physical memorial — though, as a funeral director's daughter, I must confess that the materials seem appropriate.

While I was at UT, students occasionally said that the Tower class itself was a memorial to the victims of the shootings — an educational memorial.

If the university wants to support a truly useful memorial to the many victims of the Tower shootings, it should follow a suggestion first made by students in the Tower course during 1999's spring semester, when "school shooting" became, largely because of Columbine, a specific cultural phenomenon: With any physical memorial there should be an educational memorial to the victims of the Tower shootings.

Though the National Rifle Association continues to pressure Congress to withhold funding for research on gun violence, gun violence is a public health issue.

Gun violence results in injuries, homicides and suicides. At a great university like UT, instructors, students and staff may well have ideas and strategies to confront this public problem. Further, in the spirit of civic engagement, the topic can invite the perspectives of Austinites beyond the university, many of whom are affected daily by the epidemic of gun violence on their streets and in their homes.

Especially in the face of the cruel coincidence — if coincidence it be — that Texas's Campus Carry Law goes into effect on Aug. 1, an educational memorial to what happened a half century before seems warranted.

However important a granite memorial might be, a serious and sustained effort to learn from past gun violence so that future gun violence might be prevented would be an even more powerful memorial to those killed on campus, in your fair city, on Aug. 1, 1966.

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