

Remembering Tragic Events as a Community: Creating a Permanent Memorial

Memorials to honor victims and survivors of mass violence incidents (MVIs) are critically important to remember and pay tribute to the devastating impact on and losses endured by victims, survivors, first responders and communities in which the MVI occurred. What affected individuals and communities *want*, and how they *feel*, may change over time. As such, the time-frame in which decisions are made about a permanent memorial may pose a point of conflict; and care should be taken to address all relevant concerns throughout the entire planning process.

It is important to clearly differentiate between *efforts that raise funds to directly address MVI victims' needs*; and *efforts to create a permanent memorial*. Ensuring that victims' myriad and diverse needs are identified and addressed should be a *priority* prior to any initiative to create a permanent memorial.

It is also important to take into account whether or not there is still an active investigation or prosecution. The involvement of MVI survivors and other affected individuals will likely be limited when a case has not been resolved.

Many past experiences in planning and building memorials identified a wide range of feelings and opinions about what a memorial might look like; its location; and adjunct programs and activities related to the overall permanent memorial initiative. These tips can help you navigate the planning process and, to the degree possible, *respect* and *reflect* the wishes of the many diverse stakeholders involved.

Things to Consider:

MVI victims and survivors must be included in leadership positions in *all planning processes*. Their *voices* and *choices* provide the foundation for a memorial that honors them and their loved ones.

Well-known and respected community leaders are also essential; and inclusivity and nonpartisanship (or bipartisanship) are critical to overall success. This can include leaders from:

- City, county, parish, Tribal, and state elected officials
- Civic organizations
- Multi-faith communities
- Nonprofit organizations
- School boards, school principals, student leadership, and other education entities
- Business community

- Foundations and other entities that can help with fundraising efforts
- The news media

A decision about the memorial does *not* have to be made overnight.

- *After the 2007 mass shooting at Virginia Tech, school officials took about eight months to ponder what to do with the classrooms in Norris Hall where 30 people were killed. “We felt it was important...to take a deep breath and not make a rash decision,” said Provost Mark McNamee, who chaired the university’s task force on what to do with the building.*

Some of the important initial issues to consider include:

- The creation of a nonprofit entity (or inclusion within a respected existing entity) to provide and guide oversight, fiduciary responsibility, resource development, and evaluation
- Budget (and how funds will be raised, documented and disseminated)
- Location
- Architecture
- Obtaining proper permits and zoning approval, and navigating the political and funding processes to do so, i.e., bringing water, electricity and Wi-Fi to the memorial site
- Recognition of *all* victims affected by the MVI, including (but not limited to) those killed and their family members; those injured; people who were witnesses; and first responders (among others)
- Recognition of adult and child victims and survivors
- Issues related to MVI victims’ various faiths and cultures
- Seeking guidance from the leaders of other MVI memorial efforts, who can provide honest and helpful advice, and identify potential challenges to success

Effective and inclusive strategic planning will help develop clear guiding statements and strategic goals for a memorial. Here are some sample guiding statements and strategic goals:

Mission Statements

“We come here to remember those who were killed, those who survived and those changed forever. May all who leave here know the impact of violence. May this Memorial offer comfort, strength, peace, hope and serenity.” - *Oklahoma City Memorial Foundation*

“To restore and protect the joy of youth through educational programs and positive actions in collaboration with families, schools, communities, organizations and government entities.”
- *i love you guys Foundation (created following the MVI at Platte Canyon High School in 2006 in Colorado)*

“To create and support a memorial that opens hearts, a museum that opens minds, educational

programs that open eyes, and endowed scholarships that open doors.” - *OnePULSE Foundation*

Vision Statement

“Establishing a sanctuary of healing and a beacon of hope by memorializing the lives taken, the lives saved, and all the lives affected by the Pulse Nightclub tragedy of June 12, 2016 – ensuring Pulse’s legacy of love lives on forever.” - *OnePULSE Foundation*

Goals

- “To create a respectful place where family members, members of the community and visitors could go to gain an understanding of the innocent victims of Columbine.
- To create a memorial with content and purpose, 100 percent derived from members of the Columbine community, and keeping with the scale, materials and natural forms found in the Columbine area.
- To recognize and honor the deceased, the injured, the survivors and the community members.
- To incorporate the Columbine “Never Forgotten” ribbon in the concept design for the memorial.”
 - Columbine Memorial Foundation

Among the most significant items to include in a permanent memorial are those that are left at the MVI site immediately after it occurs. These “spontaneous memorials” are heartfelt and often highly personal, and capture the essence of the impact on and emotions of survivors’ families and community members during this difficult time.

- Survivors and their families should be involved in decisions made about what mementos should be included in the permanent memorial; if they would like any of these items returned to them, the items can be photographed for inclusion in the permanent memorial (with permission from the relevant survivors).
- Items from spontaneous memorials should be carefully documented (in writing and by digital photographs or video), with care taken to preserve any mementos that will be included in the permanent memorial.
- Large quantities of non-perishable items (such as stuffed animals or memorial candles) can be documented, and then donated to nonprofit organizations in the community

Good architecture and the quality of the overall artistic design make a difference. You’re not going to make everyone happy, but it is crucial to get as much input from the community as possible on both aspects of the memorial.

Outside consulting firms can be a valuable asset in the planning of a memorial, serving as a neutral party and offering a variety of solutions based on prior experience. Efforts can be made to obtain pro bono or discounted services.

- The news media have a significant role in publicizing plans for the memorial,

and opportunities for community members to provide input. It's important to have:

- An overall strategy for local, state and national print and broadcast media
- Spokesperson(s) (including MVI victims and survivors)
- A social media strategy (including online “handles” and “hashtags” that can be universally associated with the memorial initiative) to generate public awareness and provide information about how people can contribute and/or volunteer to help

Balance the desire to memorialize the dead with the need to restore normalcy for the living.

- The people most directly affected by a MVI will likely be eager to see the memory of their loved ones, or their own traumatic experiences, enshrined in some way. They want a place where the tragedy they've experienced is acknowledged and honored.
- The building or space where the MVI occurred may still need to serve a purpose. The memorial cannot be a place where the present-day purpose of the institution is so heavily clouded by the tragedy that it is lost all together.

Place importance on the task of simultaneously honoring the victims and survivors, and creating hope for the future.

Physical memorials can also feature a wide range of resources to educate and inspire visitors and supporters. Examples from existing memorials (see “Resources” below) include:

- Displays that provide technological opportunities for interactive engagement for visitors
- Collections and archives of items retrieved from the MVI or provided by survivors
- Lesson plans
- Teaching guides
- Educational programs for youth
- Poster and/or essay contests
- Scholarships
- Annual days of collective community service
- Opportunities for survivors to provide “first person accounts” via interactive media displays, or on-site awareness programs delivered in person through lectures and roundtable discussions

A strong online presence – including a robust website and social media outreach – can help generate important public awareness about the MVI and memorial, and can help increase funding support (see “Resources” below).

Emotions run high. Individuals may express anger or disappointment with decisions made about the memorial, but often their anger stems from the fact that they are still in despair and still trying to cope with the tragedy.

Inevitably, some people are going to support the decisions, some are not. Every community is different.

What *Not* to Do:

Avoid designing a memorial that is too controversial and/or over the top for its intended audience. The memorial should be a place where visitors are able to reflect and have a moment of privacy if needed.

Avoid any actions that may preclude appropriate recognition of any people impacted by the MVI, i.e., focusing on one religion versus a multi-faith approach; or only on victims who were killed versus *all* survivors, witnesses and first responders who directly experienced the MVI.

Resources

Oklahoma City National Memorial Museum

<https://oklahomacitynationalmemorial.org/>

Columbine Memorial Foundation

<https://www.columbinememorial.org/>

OnePULSE Foundation Memorial and Museum

<https://onepulsefoundation.org/onepulse-foundation-memorial/>

i love you guys Foundation

<https://iloveguys.org/index.html#home>