



The author, planting impatiens at the base of her birdbath tribute

Picking up the pieces

Sometimes the most healing memorial to a lost loved one is the kind you build yourself.

By Abigail Carter

When Arron, my husband of almost 11 years, died, I drowned in grief—my own and that of our children, who were 6 and 2 at the time. I wrapped grief around myself like a protective blanket, frightened of forgetting the man I loved so much. Smiles and happiness were my enemies; they threatened my memories of Arron. Bouts of joy meant I wasn't thinking about him, wasn't adequately mourning his loss. They felt hollow and empty in comparison to my tears.

Arron died in the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, and "We will never forget" quickly became a national slogan, one seen on bumper stickers and T-shirts across

the country. Each time I read that slogan it cuts me like a knife. I wonder how it would be possible to ever forget Arron. The world attempted in so many heartfelt ways to honor the 9/11 victims. There was a need, through certain formal memorials, to understand, to make meaning where there was none. So there are thousands of plaques, public statues, teddy bears, quilts, drawings, paintings and writings. I encounter them in the most unusual places: the courtyard of an ancient lighthouse on Block Island, a garden in front of a hospital in New Jersey, at Grosvenor Square in London, which is home to a steel beam from the towers. Our desire to remember our dead is evident in the hardware we use to build our memorials: stone, bronze, steel, marble. These materials are enduring; they'll last many lifetimes. Remembering must have permanence. Honor must have immortality.

And yet, for me, in each memorial where I sought solace, I found none. That bronze eagle soaring above an open book inscribed with Arron's name didn't represent my husband. Perhaps it was for someone else's husband, someone else's idea of honor. That eagle at the memorial in the county where we live was merely an icon, of which there are many—an eagle, a firefighter's helmet, a stuffed animal, an angel. These icons represented not life,

but death, or more specifically, a 9/11 death. They are the symbols of a more universal mythology; they certainly do not apply to the man I knew and loved.

I spent the first anniversary of September 11 at ground zero. My mother-in-law and I packed ourselves into a large barricaded area with throngs of other families, many wearing T-shirts or carrying placards emblazoned with their loved one's image, some clutching teddy bears and flowers. After hearing Arron's name read aloud incorrectly, we were herded down the long ramp into the pit. I was overcome by how much I hated that place. I dropped a flower unceremoniously into a temporary ring, now containing thousands of flowers. I vowed that I would never spend another anniversary like that again. It did not honor Arron in any way. And so I began to wonder what would.

As the months passed, the idea of creating my own memorial began to take shape. I knew I had to stop relying on the outside world to pay tribute to Arron for us. I needed to create a place where the children and I could go to honor Arron, somewhere we would feel comfortable remembering him. Typically, this is a graveyard or a special place like a lake where a loved one's ashes are sprinkled. We had no gravestone and no ashes, no place that was just ours and ours alone.

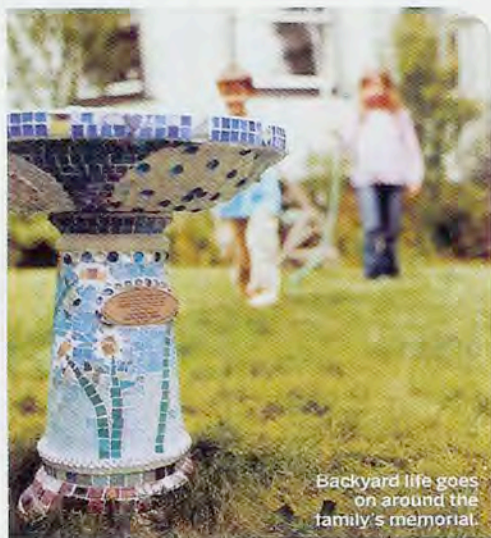
self expression

» Gradually, I started having a few ideas. Arron used to call me Bird as an endearment. Sometimes when the birds outside were being particularly loud, he would ask, "Hey, Bird, what are those birds talking about?" My mind always went blank trying to think of some witty response. One morning when I heard birds singing in the yard, the idea for his memorial suddenly came to me: a birdbath.

Arron loved tiles and tiling. After we renovated our kitchen, we had fun tiling our own backsplash in black-and-white marble. He enjoyed doing it so much that one of the projects on his home-improvement agenda was to build a bathroom in our basement, complete with a mosaic-tiled Turkish bath. I scoffed at Arron's plan, but I admired his ambition. Keeping true to his whimsical nature, I decided to cover the memorial birdbath in mosaic tiles.

Finding the right birdbath proved difficult. One cold, rainy November day, I piled the kids in the car for a trip to Fountains of Wayne. This landmark outlet sells every conceivable garden ornament, including 8-foot angels, elves, gnomes and donkeys, all incongruously displayed along a busy New Jersey highway. I quickly chose a birdbath covered in rosettes with a flat bowl. Unfortunately, as I learned more about tiling, I discovered it would be difficult to create a mosaic around the rosettes. During a spring trip to another garden center, I finally found the right birdbath. It was simple and smooth, with a nice deep bowl. Now I could begin my project.

Ideas for the images came slowly,



Backyard life goes on around the family's memorial.

“I filled the birdbath with Champagne and then handed everyone a silly straw.”

over time. I envisioned a butterfly in the center of the bowl, representing Arron and his passage into the afterlife. For months after his death, I saw butterflies everywhere. The strangest sighting was during my first trip to ground zero. I boarded a ferry from midtown's Pier 94 with other victims' families and there, despite the cold October wind, was a monarch butterfly flying right out over the water.

Needless to say, I depicted myself as a bird and placed it above the butterfly. Arron dubbed our daughter Pickle Horse when she was a tiny infant, the name coming from the lyrics of a song he made up about her, and so she appears as a green horse to the left of the butterfly. Arron named our son Bone Maker due to the extraordinary quantities of milk he consumed; given his penchant for chocolate milk, he appears as a brown cow on the butterfly's right. There is a moon for the cow to leap over, which doubles as a symbol of our love,

and, last but not least, our beloved golden retriever, Harley, makes a cameo appearance at the butterfly's feet.

I began puzzling broken bits of glass into place to form the images. It was an exercise in trial, error and patience. I learned to break the tiles without shattering them, to glue the various pieces individually, constantly rearranging and refitting. For months, my hands were caked in cement adhesive and covered with tiny cuts. One by one, each animal emerged as its own unique character. It seemed at times that I had divine guidance as perfectly sized pieces found their way into my hand.

The underside of the bowl has a wavy, watery appearance and includes a couple of fish. I decorated the pedestal base in daisies in memory of Arron's bringing his "girls" daisies on Valentine's Day. I also have a wonderful picture of Arron and our son with daisies behind their ears. Finally, a plaque transformed the birdbath into a true memorial honoring Arron.

On the plaque, etched in bronze, is a poem by Henry Van Dyke and a simple inscription:

*Time is too slow for those who wait,
Too swift for those who fear,
Too long for those who grieve,
Too short for those who rejoice,
But for those who love,
Time is not.*

*Created with love for
Arron, Fabbo, Daddy
1961-2001*

I dedicated the birdbath to Arron on October 8, 2004, the third anniversary of our family's private memorial service for him. Forty friends and neighbors gathered in our yard as I filled the birdbath's bowl with Champagne and handed everyone a silly straw to drink from. I was so happy to finally have a

memorial that seemed right that I didn't feel a moment of sadness. A whimsical dedication for a whimsical memorial for a whimsical man—Arron would have loved its irreverence and humor, and I could feel his pride in my accomplishment. I later discovered that my audience had been awed by this display of love and remembrance. Many had cried during my dedication; as for me, I felt nothing but joy. I had created something that represented the universe that was my family, and I had achieved my goal of honoring my husband.

It is getting cooler now, and the water in the birdbath will soon ice over. But I look forward to the spring, when the birds will come to bathe. I imagine myself kneeling by a rosebush, weeding and looking up to see birds dancing around in the depths of my masterpiece, chirping their pleasure. This time, when I hear Arron asking me, "What are they saying, Bird?" I'll tell him, "They are saying I love you." ■