

Memorial set in stone

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DEKALB – Thirty years ago, on June 5, 1979, an early-morning house fire engulfed the home of a 40-year-old associate professor of English, who was home sleeping along with his 38-year-old wife and their two children, ages 2 and 4.

It's not clear how the fire started, but when their bodies were found, all four were discovered in the children's bedroom, suggesting the parents died trying to save their children.

The deaths of Russell and Jeanne Durning, and their children Rebecca and Eleanor, were among the worst tragedies in DeKalb history, and it remains embedded in the minds of those who knew the family.

"We were all devastated by it," said Arra Garab, who along with his wife, Suzanne, was asked to identify the bodies. "It came as such a shock. The father, mother and those lovely girls."

In the few years the Durning family lived in DeKalb, they had left their mark. Today, that mark can be seen in a memorial garden dedicated to the family at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, and also in the endowed Russell Durning Family Memorial Fellowship awarded each spring to an NIU student studying English.

Two years before the fire, the Durnings had left another mark, imprinting their hands in the concrete of a patio poured outside their home near the NIU campus.

The house was gutted after the fire, but it was not destroyed. The framework withstood the damage, and the fire's marks can still be seen in the house rafters. That's all the physical evidence that remains from the Durning's tenure there, other than the first initials, hand prints and date (6-24-77) left in the patio cement.

When the current homeowners decided to break up the concrete and put in a brick patio, they feared that, too, would disappear.

"We've been talking for years that if we ever rip it up, we should give it to the church," said Jeff Herra, who has owned the house, with his wife, Dana, since 2001. "You can't just throw that out."

Instead, the Herras contacted St. Paul's, where the memorial garden is located, and a piece of the concrete containing the hand prints became part of the memorial garden located outside the church at 900 Normal Road. A dedication was held Sunday, officiated by Interim Rector Mother Gwynne Wright.

Retired DeKalb High School teacher Kathy Dust said the Durnings were active in the church, and Russell was popular among his students. Her late husband, Philip Dust, was also a colleague in the NIU English department.

“He was very broken up by it, as all of us were,” Dust said. “In those days, we had good fellowship and social interaction among the English department. A lot of us had come at the end of the 1960s or early ‘70s as new faculty, and there was a feeling of sociability among members of the department, a lot of whom were starting families. We had more than just an intellectual bond.

“They were so nice, and no one could believe it happened to them,” she said. “It was horrific. That’s the only word I can use to describe it.”

As horrific as it was, the family is still remembered today, and thought of by some who were not even born when the four family members were killed. That includes Dana Herra, who was born a month after the fire.

“To [put handprints in cement] means they were intending to stay in that house for a while,” she said. “They were going to stay and raise their kids there. This is probably the last mark they left at the house.”

Jeff Herra, who noted that Rebecca Durning would be his age today, said he’s glad the church has something more than a sign in the memorial garden.

“It makes for much more of an attachment to the family,” he said. “This is something they physically created themselves.”

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