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'The time is right'

 By Aaron Bailey
 05/22/2008

Group says city needs memorial to skywalk tragedy

When the Hyatt Regency skywalk collapsed 27 years ago, 114 lives were lost and hundreds others were forever altered. Not only did Kansas City's physical landscape change, but so did the template for mass tort litigation.

And yet there are no memorials to the tragedy anywhere in the city. Some say that's because the community needs to move on. Others say a memorial is needed to help heal the decades-old wounds — not to focus on the past, but look to the future.

While there are no reminders of one of the deadliest structural collapses in modern history, a few local attorneys, some of them personally affected by the accident, are trying to change that.

Brent Wright wasn't at the Hyatt for the tea dance on July 17, 1981. But his mother and stepfather died in the collapse.

Wright, an attorney with Horn Aylward & Bandy, is one of five directors for the Skywalk Memorial Foundation. The group recently presented Kansas City park commissioners with a proposal for a memorial at Washington Square Park, which is only a few blocks from the site of the tragedy. Wright said the group hopes to get the OK soon so they can begin a full-court press for fundraising and nail down the design.

"The goal is really to honor and remember those people who lost their lives or were injured," Wright said. "And to also honor the firefighters, EMTs, police officers and others who were involved with the rescue effort."

Saving, preserving history

Around 2000, attorney Bill Quatman was in his office at Shughart Thomson & Kilroy when an employee wanted him to sign off on some routine housekeeping. Several boxes of records needed to be destroyed from when the firm represented the architects of the Hyatt



Attorney Brent Wright stands in Washington Square Park in Kansas City, just blocks from where his mother and stepfather were killed in the 1981 skywalk collapse at the Hyatt Regency. Wright is now part of a group seeking to build a memorial to the tragedy, which could be located at the park. *Photo by Scott Lauck*

in the litigation fallout from the collapse.

"I realized what was in them, and said, 'Do not destroy these — ever,'" Quatman recalled. "We were that close to losing all of that history."

Quatman was an architect prior to becoming an attorney. Like many architects in the 1980s, he followed the Hyatt disaster with keen interest, with an eye on trying to find the truth behind the structural collapse. He pored over the boxes and began researching exactly what caused the collapse.

He has since become somewhat of an expert on the subject, giving lectures about the cause of the collapse to audiences around the country.

Essentially, the skywalks' engineer made a key miscalculation, Quatman said. While the design originally called for a single beam to connect the second- and fourth-story skywalks to their anchors at the ceiling, the designer changed the plan before construction. The change called for two beams, causing the fourth-story skywalk to bear the entire 32-ton weight of the second-story walkway.

"It's a reminder for engineers of the importance of the little things," Quatman said. "This was a little detail in a big hotel."

There are many misconceptions about the cause of the collapse, Quatman said, from vibrations of the music from the band to the dancers themselves. Quatman works to dispel those "urban legends." And he now works to memorialize those affected from the collapse.

When the 25th anniversary of the collapse came in 2006, Quatman heard about the memorial effort and became involved. He is chairman of the design committee, and will play a key role in the memorial's appearance.

Litigation tests courts, sets precedent

When Wright's mother and stepfather were killed in the collapse, he became an unwitting part of a series of state and federal civil lawsuits that would challenge the courts. A majority of the suits were filed in Jackson County, and assigned to Judge Tim O'Leary.

Wright remembers how his attorney, S. Preston Williams, and other lawyers involved in the litigation helped him through that difficult time. He turned 18 just days after the collapse, and becoming a lawyer hadn't yet crossed his mind.

"They were so helpful, I'll always remember that," Wright said. "I hope as a lawyer I can do some of those things they did for me for other people."

Williams said he gravitated to the case because his son, Mark, was one of the last people pulled from the rubble to emerge alive. He said there was "a big fight" in federal court over who would represent the litigants, and he was eventually chosen as one of the lead attorneys.

"I've been told on a number of occasions it was one of the best collective civil actions to go through the U.S. courts; we got everyone taken care of," said Williams, who still operates a solo practice in the Northland. "There were plenty of defendants to swing at, and we just let them fight for who was at fault."

O'Leary recalls the court proceedings of the Hyatt disaster as a smooth process as well for the circumstances. In about two years, most of the cases ended in a class action settlement, believed to be one of the first in the country. O'Leary said most of the litigants received a high percentage interest rate, around 11 percent.

The federal suits were also given class status by U.S. District Judge Scott O. Wright, a first for that magnitude of litigants in the Western District of Missouri.

O'Leary, who is now an attorney at Shughart, said the proceedings were extremely emotional. But the amounts of the settlements were on the average higher and "more

generous" than other wrongful death settlements at the time, he said.

"For those people, it was a great loss, just a great loss," O'Leary said. "But we had most of them settled or disposed of in less than two years. That was unheard of. So we felt really good about the lawyers, and the judicial system really worked to get those matters resolved for those people in such a short time."

Now or never?

Brent Wright said he hopes the memorial will be built in three phases: a garden, a fountain display and a sculpture. The preliminary plans don't include a listing of names of those who died or were injured that day, he said. Instead, it will be a place for reflection and contemplation.

There's no estimated price tag for the project, but donations have already started coming in through an account managed by the Greater Kansas City Community Foundation. A Web site has also been created to help inform the public about the project.

"We really want to do this the right way," Wright said.

There's no clear reason why a memorial hasn't materialized yet. Williams said he isn't sure himself about the idea. He said that he and his son, who recovered fully and "is strong as a bull," have moved on from the tragedy.

"I'm not sure how I feel about any further emphasis on it," Williams said. "Me and my son have tried to move on. We don't want to dwell on it. I don't want to go back and relive it, frankly. But it's whatever the people want."

But Wright speaks with conviction and excitement when he talks about the memorial. While the foundation doesn't have a timetable for when it hopes to see the memorial complete, Wright said it depends on how and when the park commissioners rule.

"We believe the time is now," Wright said with the passion of an attorney trying to sway a jury. "I know in years past, there's been thoughts that it was too soon, or that it's too painful to remember for some people. But now, just about 27 years later, everyone we've heard from, and our own feeling, is that the time is right to do this now."

To find out more about the memorial, visit www.skywalkmemorial.org.

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