

LAKE COUNTY NEWS-SUN

Memorial garden dedicated to victims of AB Specialty Silicones explosion; 'This is an ideal place to come and remember'



A memorial garden for the four men killed in the AB Quality Silicones explosion five years ago was dedicated Friday. (Steve Sadin/Lake County News-Sun)



By **STEVE SADIN** | Lake County News-Sun

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From the first blooms of spring to the last blossoms of fall and the foliage around them, there will always be life in memory of Daniel Nicklas, Allen Stevens, Byron Biehn and Jeff Cummings — the men killed in the AB Specialty Silicones explosion five years ago.

Large stones hold soil in a circular garden. On the stone are four plaques containing a star and the message, “Always Remembered, Never Forgotten.” The names of each victim are included.

“It’s always in bloom,” said Cummings’ wife, Denise. “How incredibly thoughtful it is. This is an ideal place to come and remember. You can’t turn your emotions off.”



The Rev. Dave Adams, pastor of New Song Ministries in Zion, speaks as Mac Penman and Stephanie Penman listen behind him. (Steve Sadin/Lake County News-Sun)

Biehn, Stevens, Nicklas and Cummings, were all part of what AB Silicones general manager and part owner Mac Penman calls Team AB. The company operates out of four buildings in Waukegan, and one was leveled in the blast on May 3, 2019. It was rebuilt.

Team AB dedicated The May 3 Memorial Garden Friday in Waukegan, five years to the day after the explosion took four lives and injured three others, giving the workers a place to reflect and remember.

Divided into four quadrants with one dedicated to each man, local stone was used to build the benches, with one of the plaques in front of each bench. There is a sculpture in the center which Mac Penman said represents eternal life.

"This is a small company; we're very close," said Stephanie Penman, Mac Penman's wife and another part owner of the privately held company. "We were determined to rebuild and get through this. This garden is a place where people can sit and remember."

"I knew two of them for 30 years," Mac Penman added. "We built the garden so Team AB has a place to always remember and never forget. Our four stars will never be forgotten."

Sitting on one of the benches was AB worker Bob Blaker and his wife remembering his co-workers. A 13-year AB veteran, he said he cannot get the loss of the four men out of his mind.

"It doesn't feel like it was five years ago," Blaker said. "It feels like yesterday. I still have texts from them on my phone. I couldn't delete them."



Team AB and community members paid tribute to the four men killed when one of the company's buildings exploded five years ago Friday. (Steve Sadin/Lake County News-Sun)

George Bridges, Jr., the chief of staff to Waukegan Mayor Ann Taylor, and the city's fire chief at the time of the blast, said the night of May 3, 2019, remains emblazoned on his mind. He scrambled to find numerous resources to deal with a blast felt for miles around.

"It was overwhelming with everything," Bridges said. "We were dealing with EMT and emergency systems."

Through the days following the explosion, he said as he worked closely with the people at AB Silicones he felt "adopted into their family." Everyone involved remains on his mind daily, he said.



People listen to speakers at the dedication of the memorial garden. (Steve Sadin/Lake County News-Sun)

“The event of May 2019, wasn’t just life-changing, but life-strengthening,” Bridges said. “Our law enforcement and fire department families will forever be connected. In the midst of the destruction, I was in awe of how dedicated our public safety professionals worked in the midst of danger.”

Mac Penman said a week after the explosion, the Rev. Dave Adams, the pastor of New Song Ministries in Zion, led a memorial service. He talked about the garden and its meaning Friday.

“It is a symbol of what was, and what is next,” Adams said. “It will be blooming whenever we are there.”

Taylor said she was moved by the memorial garden, and the effort of the company to rebuild the structure. She took some time before the ceremony to explore the garden and visit with some of the people there.

“This is a good way to honor these men,” she said. “It is a nice way for their co-workers and families to remember them.”

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