

# Sami's story is set in stone

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The gravesite under the gnarled branches of an ancient wingnut tree tells a story.

Jesus holds the ropes of 3-year-old Sami McDonald's swing. He's laughing. So is Sami. The words to her favorite song, Jesus Loves Me, are etched in the granite rock beneath her bare feet. The outline of her hand is carved in stone, alongside those of her brother, Jacob, and sister, Becca. Sami's signature is even there—a big "S," and the "a" with a smiley face drawn in the middle.

It's the scene her parents Geoff and Debi McDonald have treasured ever since Sami drowned on May 2, 2006. It's how they saw her earlier that day—swinging as she sang, "Jesus loves me, this I know ..."

Amid unspeakable loss, the McDonalds rest on what they know to be true and encourage others with stories of Sami's profound, childlike faith. How she wouldn't let anyone forget to pray before eating or going to bed. How she collected rocks, seeing beauty in even the smallest parking lot pebbles in her pocket. How on the morning she died, Sami asked Debi to read a book about Jesus' resurrection. And when they closed the last page, she found her daddy and asked him to read it over again. How she loved the color pink, wearing her clothes backward and saying the McDonald's restaurant slogan, 'I'm lovin' it.'



RUTH SCHENK/THE SOUTHEAST OUTLOOK

The McDonald family prays that the monument will point people to faith in Christ. "We pray that people who come to this monument will stop to think about Jesus, our Redeemer, our Comforter, our Rock," Geoff said at the service.

## A monument to faith

This isn't the journey the McDonalds would have chosen. It's hard. But from the beginning they looked for ways to point people to Jesus.

That's why Sami's story is told in the monument at Cave Hill Cemetery. Debi and Geoff said the sculptures of Sami with Jesus are not for them.

"When I think of Sami in heaven, I can almost hear her saying, 'Mom, I'm lovin' it,'" Debi said. It's more for grieving strangers than close friends.

"This monument is not for us or those who know us," Geoff said. "They know our faith and trust in Christ. This monument is more for those who do not know us; and more for those who do not know the Lord and haven't yet placed their trust in Him. It is our hope and prayer that this monument will speak into the hearts of those who see it, a story of a little girl, full of joy, who lived her life in Christ's strong, loving hands and who now lives with Him in heaven. We pray it will speak of the trust that her family has in Christ."

A crowd of more than 300 began gathering an hour early on Saturday, Sept. 15, for a memorial service at Cave Hill. Each held a long-stemmed pink rose, Sami's favorite color, to symbolize Christ's love.

It was a time of worship and prayer. A time to reflect on the life of a little girl who loved Jesus.

# Sculpting a picture of heaven

The McDonalds worked with Maine sculptor Tom White and monument architect Terry Joy to create a picture of the faith that carries them. There's joy. Jesus and Sami are grinning. And there's hope. Jesus rests above the engraved words "Sam's Rock," the name of the prayer groups that began in schools after Sami died. The words of Isaiah 26:4 are etched in stone to the right of Sami's swing: "Trust in the Lord the Lord forever, for the Lord is the rock eternal." There's a green butterfly signifying new life, baby birds and a place to leave things Sami loved to collect.

Joy said he feels fortunate to be involved in "something like this."

"I've been amazed with the McDonalds' faith. All I am is an instrument to convey that in stone."

White called it an "honor" to sculpt Jesus and Sami.

"It's unbelievable what God has in mind here," he said. "I just wanted to be a Western cowboy. I never dreamed this was what God wanted me to do. It's an incredible joy."

## A painful, beautiful journey

From the beginning, the McDonalds prayed that Sami's death would glorify God and make people stop and think about Jesus.

"God promises that one day we will be with Sami again," Debi said. "We cling to that. Until that day, we're going to be about His business of sharing faith and hope."

In the last year, Sam's Rock prayer groups have grown to include middle and high schools. Now thousands wear Sam's Rock T-shirts in 28 states and eight countries.

Everywhere those T-shirts appeared—in grocery stores, prison outreach, gas stations and schools, people asked what Sam's Rock meant. It was exactly what Debi hoped would happen. Every encounter offered a chance to tell Sami's story.

Debi was wearing a Sam's rock T-shirt in San Diego when a man stopped her. He had seen the story in the Outlook and asked about the prayer groups.

"Often when I'm having a bad day, when I'm missing Sami so much, God gives me a moment like that," Debi said. "The shirts connect people to each other by breaking down barriers, getting right to the point of what life is all about," Debi said. "It gives people the chance to talk about something of eternal value."

When she gives out a shirt, Debi tells people, "When you wear Sami's Rock, don't remember her death and the sorrow, remember that because of her Rock, our Rock, she is alive—she won. She got to go to heaven first, and she patiently waits for you to come play with her in heaven."

There are more than 2,000 new visitors each month to Sam's Rock website, [www.samsrock.net](http://www.samsrock.net), where people can read about Sami, post their prayer requests and order T-shirts. The ministry has grown to include service projects in women's shelters and schools. "Sam's Rock stands as a testimony that God is faithful to deliver us through the trials of this life," Geoff said. "Our journey through grief has been painful, yet beautiful. And it continues. Every step has God's amazing handwriting written all over it."