

Sam's Rock ornament packs a powerful message

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Most ornaments tell a story. But one ornament, a shiny brass cutout of Jesus laughing as he swings a little girl, tells a story that already has touched hundreds of thousands of lives across the country.

The little girl on the swing is Sami McDonald, who drowned in May, 2006. The 3-year-old was swinging and singing Jesus Loves Me the last time her parents, Southeast members Geoff and Debi McDonald, saw her in the backyard.

They worked with Maine sculptor Tom White to create an image of faith that has carried them through unspeakable loss. The ornament is a miniature replica of the life-sized, bronze sculptures at Cave Hill Cemetery where visitors run their hands over the words to Jesus Loves Me and the outline of Sami's hand, read about Sam's Rock and the words of 2 Sam. 22:2: The Lord is our Rock ..."

The McDonalds had the monument built to share their faith and hope.

"That 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 placed their trust in Him. It is our hope and prayer that it 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."

The goal of the ornament is the same.

"For those who don't know the story, we hope it will speak to them of the love of Christ for our children, as Christ swings a little girl on a swing, and share the message of 2 Sam. 22:2 that the Lord is our Rock," Debi said. "And we hope that they will want to know more about Sami's story. For those who know the story, we hope the ornament is a reminder of God's faithfulness to be our Rock and see us through anything."

The McDonalds' journey hasn't been easy, but from the beginning, they have focused on turning their own loss into something good. Just months after Sami died, Debi founded Sam's Rock, prayer groups of parents and teachers that meet in public schools. In the last five years, Sam's Rock has grown to dozens of groups that meet in elementary, middle and high schools in Louisville, Indianapolis, and Texas. More than 100,000 people have logged onto the Sam's Rock website to read about the ministry. Thousands wear Sam's Rock T-shirts that also open the door to talk about faith and hope. In the last year, the path to Sam's monument at Cave Hill has become well-worn from visitors.

The ornament is a first for White, who called himself more of a West Texas redneck than an artist. He'd never drawn a sketch until he had a life-changing encounter with God at age 30.

In fact, he made fun of art classes in high school and made a living as a carpenter.

His life changed drastically after another carpenter at a construction site kept asking him to go to church until he agreed to go. The Gospel sunk in slowly, but Tom never looked back once he decided to follow Jesus. He met his wife, Marcey, in a Bible study.

On a whim one day in 1991, Tom fashioned a simple sculpture of an Indian. He said the ability to sculpt was instantaneous. He signed up for an art class, but the instructor told him not to come back—there was nothing she could teach him.

For years, Tom thought of his art as a hobby, but Marcey tried to convince him otherwise.

"I'm just a carpenter," Tom told her. "I don't even know the name of an artist."

"You know God," she shot back.



They left Texas to find a new home in Maine because Marcey remembered a picture she'd seen of the state as a child. With little money in their pockets, the Whites found an inn that needed a lot of work. They named it Prodigal Inn & Gallery because it described their story. Marcey ran the inn while Tom sculpted in the barn.

Tom said there's no doubt in his mind that his ability to sculpt is God's gift.

"If God isn't in the room with me, the clay just gets pushed around," he said. "But if He's there, I will work all night."

The first Jesus figure Tom ever sculpted was for Southeast members Matt and Glenna Bevin, whose daughter, Brittiney, died in a car accident in 2003. The two families met at an art show and became friends. Matt asked Tom why he'd never sculpted Jesus—even though faith was woven through all his work. Tom thought about it a minute, then explained that the Jesus he would fashion would be a strong, masculine carpenter with big hands. He'd laugh out loud and spend time with children.

The Bevins asked Tom to create sculptures of Brittiney and a group of children running to Jesus' open arms. That's how they remember her. That same Jesus, which also is at Sami's monument near Brittiney's at Cave Hill, is also in churches, Christian schools and youth centers around the country.

Tom also sculpts historical scenes, American soldiers, sports heroes, biblical scenes, pets and children, which are displayed in parks, schools, libraries, churches, town squares and war memorials.