

## THE WHITE CROSSES AT NYE BEACH by Carla Perry



*Dylan with White Crosses — "There's been too many deaths in 2006."* photo by Carla Perry

The story of the white crosses in Newport begins on August 17, 2005. That was the Wednesday one hundred and fifty people lined up on the sidewalk in front of the National Guard Armory along Highway 101 in Newport, on the Oregon coast.

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August 17th was overcast and chilly, our normal summer climate. The people who gathered on Highway 101 were mostly middle-aged men and women, grandparents, retirees. Attired in denim, corduroy, fleece and down, our normal summer clothes.

In front of us was a long row of one-gallon black plastic pots, each filled with sand. The sand in each pot held erect one white wooden cross. There were thirty-six cans, thirty-six crosses. Each cross bore the name - in large black letters on its horizontal beam - of an Oregonian killed in Iraq. Someone walked along the gutter and stuck a few bright carnations into the base of each cross. Another of us planted American flags alongside the flowers. We all held lit candles. We carried signs: "Not One More Child."

"Peace Now." The sign "Bring Our Children Home," was held by a woman who also carried an eight by ten framed photo of a young man dressed in a blue Navy uniform.

For a few hours we chatted, waved, gave the high-five, looked hopefully into the faces of passing motorists. We were pained, but not surprised, at the occasional curse flung at us from an open car window. When the light began to fade, we packed up the crosses, candles, flowers and flags, and went home.

The next morning at four AM, John, who with his wife Bridget had constructed the crosses, drove them to the Nye Beach Turnaround, the central beach access in Newport. It was still dark. He carried them down to the sand and lined them up, an American flag at each end. The sign "For what noble cause did our children die?" faced beachgoers who would stand along the seawall to watch the ocean.

He took the crosses to the beach with the fantasy of letting the dead men start a dialog with anyone who had something they wanted to say, and give the dead men an opportunity to send messages to their loved ones. "It wasn't about pro-war or anti-war," John said. "It was to honor and respect the men who died. I wanted beach walkers to know that these men had been real Oregonians, real people."

John, mid-sixtyish, grizzled behind his full grey beard, hoped someone might ask him what he was doing. No one came by. It was dark and everyone was still asleep when John went home. But by the time the sun came out and the first dog walkers appeared on the beach, a dialog had begun.

John hoped the city and State Park authorities would leave the crosses through the weekend, and they did. In fact, months went by. What began as a semi-rational act became a semi-permanent memorial, the installation of thirty-six pristine crosses lined up on the beach. Residents, tourists, lovers walked along the line of crosses, bending to read the names and biographical information. Sometimes they added a personal touch to a specific cross—a sea grass necklace. A flower. A feather.

On the first of September, half the crosses disappeared. Two days later, the rest were gone. Someone raised the funds necessary to purchase replacement material for duplicate crosses and they were re-planted in the sand before the end of the week. The black-lettered names of the dead glistened against their pure white backgrounds.

A homeless Vietnam veteran burned the second set of crosses. He was found asleep, curled next to the glowing embers and ashes the next morning. The police urged him out of town.

When John and Bridget constructed the third set of crosses, they also sent out a call. On September 24, at four in the afternoon, twenty people gathered at the Nye Beach Turnaround parking lot. John distributed the crosses from the back of his Subaru. We each carried two crosses down to the beach, and one of us, the two flags. I brought my dog and my camera. I kept Dylan, a large black Lab, leashed. He'd had surgery and the vet said not to let him run.

A young woman approached us and asked if there might be a blank cross she could carry. She was small, with short wavy dark hair, in a blue windbreaker and jeans. Her demeanor, her quiet voice showed her anguish. Her boyfriend, home on leave, had committed suicide rather than return to an Iraqi battlefield. She wondered if a suicide at home counted in the total dead. It didn't. But John reached into his car. By chance he had brought one blank cross. And he gave it to her.

As we lined up in serpentine procession down the ramp onto the beach, a tall young man approached. He was muscular, dressed in a red hooded sweatshirt and tan shorts. "What are you doing?" he demanded. I froze, as if we were in trouble.

"We're conducting a peace memorial for the young men of Oregon who died in Iraq," John said. "We want to honor them by name, age, and what town they were from. We want to put a face to the men who gave their lives in this war. We want them remembered as individuals for their heroic acts and as sons and fathers, daughters and mothers, brothers, sisters, friends."

"Do you have a cross with the name Joseph Blickenstaff on it," the man asked.

Yes, someone in the group was holding it.

"Can I carry that one? Joseph was my brother."

The group walked single file down onto the sand and formed a circle. Each of us read the name on our crosses, then the information printed on the back, a short paragraph that included the age, rank, division, hometown, and where in Iraq the soldier died.

When we got to Eric Blickenstaff, he told us the story of how he had driven from his home in Albany that morning. "I just had to get out of town." He said he had no clear destination. It was just the day, sunny and warm and he'd driven southwest, towards the coast. And he just happened to arrive at the parking lot of the Nye Beach Turnaround in Newport at 4:04 PM. "My brother was a wonderful man, we all miss him so much. I'm really grateful to have a place to set down my grief."

Eric wasn't the only one crying.

We planted the crosses parallel to the surf-line, close to the sea wall. They stretched the length of a city block. The names faced the ocean and the setting sun.

A woman came up to us. "The man I live with is in and out of his PTSD from Iraq," she said. She had driven from Lincoln City just to take a walk on the beach. "He's been drinking for three weeks and hasn't left the house. But I think he'd leave the house for this. Nobody ever did this for his buddies."

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People came and went. There were stories to be told. Waves shifted the crosses. Visitors left more mementos. There was something new every day. I took photos to document the changes.

Dylan was better. I'd let him off the leash, but there was no ball-chasing, no full-out running yet. He could walk into the waves and paddle around, and that gave him pleasure. I thought the saltwater would help heal the incision. The vet said the growth didn't look cancerous.

There were messages of love and hope in the sand; nameless friends draped blue ribbons around the crosses, placed shells and stones at their bases. Then they weren't strangers any more. Two more American flags showed up. There was always someone to right a cross toppled by waves, someone out there setting them straight. One day a bouquet of red carnations appeared. When those began drooping, a new bouquet replaced them. Someone braided a seaweed wreath and hung it on a cross. As autumn came on, high tides surrounded the crosses but did no damage because, by then, the foot traffic had created a shallow moat. Water encircled but never touched the crosses.

One day Dylan sat himself down in front of the crosses as I did my photo-documentation from the ramp that led down to the beach. I tried to remain the neutral observer and urged him to move, but he wouldn't, so I took his photo, too.

Bridget, the heart of the project, laminated color photos of each soldier and John stapled them to the appropriate crosses. She had gone online to research the identity of each soldier. She'd assembled their bios. Now, with faces, you could see how very young they were.

I met John on the beach some mornings, just before dawn. We used the light of the rising sun to photograph, then talk over and analyze the day-to-day changes. We tried to interpret what we witnessed - the interaction of the crosses, people, ocean, weather.

A Viet Nam veteran waited for us one morning. He said he'd been watching John do cross repairs from his home on the bluff. "I had to drive down to see who you are and say thank you."

Over time, the tides came in higher. Some days I'd walk the sands of Nye Beach in the afternoon, pretending I was just a tourist with a dog walking the surf-line. In October, a tidal swell washed away all but twelve crosses. Huge mounds of shivering spindrift, the sea foam that shows up after winter storms, coated everything. It looked like the aftermath of a terrible battle.

One dawn, as Dylan and I walked south on the beach, I looked up at the bluff. Not quite at the top was the blank cross, silhouetted against the morning sky, guarding our beach, yet safe from the tides.

The next morning I found a pile of white wood sticks atop a small sand dune near the ramp to the parking lot. The crosses were in pieces, like broken bones. Seaweed—like gauze unwound from wounds—dried in the sand. It was a sad battalion. Beach walkers had rescued the floating pieces and brought them back to higher ground. There they remained for a few days.

But it didn't feel right, so John brought his air compressor and re-stapled the horizontals to the verticals. I helped him replant the crosses and the one remaining flag on the highest beach mound. We arranged the twenty-eight complete crosses in a small circle, but left the blank one where it stood at attention on the bluff. John and I talked about the abject loneliness of suicide and of honoring the wishes of the living person who saved that particular cross.

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Word of the memorial spread and the crosses at Nye Beach became a minor sightseeing attraction. The battalion welcomed people onto the beach. They were tended like a garden. The more bedraggled they became, the more interaction they encouraged. The laminated sign, "For what noble cause did our children die?" was torn from its stick and sliced in half, carefully, by a knife or scissors, and although it lay on the ground, someone else had carefully cleared the sand from its face. Some people stood there quietly, holding their children's hands; others sat and cried. One man could only look back at the memorial, over his shoulder, from a safe distance.

One day someone rinsed all the wet sand and debris from each cross. The men were back to wearing their white dress uniforms. Illuminated at sunset, they were soldiers home from the war.

By then, the group of crosses had become a small cluster on a small mound in the direct path of people arriving and leaving the beach. At high tide, waves crashed into the seawall and plumed upwards. Someone kept re-rooting the fallen crosses to stand. Dylan and I tried walking among the storm detritus but eventually the winter waves had become high and dangerous and the sandy beach was almost completely gone.

There were twenty-seven crosses one day, twenty the next. And sixteen after that. Dylan's condition deteriorated. He was in pain and died November 15, 2005, just over a year ago. When I looked over my photos of the crosses, I recalled how he had annoyed me the day he sat in front of my view, a sad dog on a gray beach on a cold day. Now Dylan faced me dead on, sitting in front of Joseph M. Blickenstaff's cross.

Carefully placed mementos accumulated around the remaining crosses through December. A cell phone. A book, the *Stock Traders Almanac 2002*. Two baseball caps, a ruined straw hat. More red carnations, a small gourd, a polished agate slab, kelp tails wound like a belt, a Western Family coffee can holding two flags, yellow daffodils in a glass jar, chocolates wrapped in silver foil, candles, a snow globe of a boy and girl waving at each other.

One day the crosses, flags, and mementos were gone. The Parks Service had been asked to remove the crosses. They said the memorial was turning into a public nuisance. The Ranger who called John gave him thirty days to come and pick up the crosses; if no one came to claim them, they'd be burnt, not treated as trash. He said the crew who removed the crosses was made of his younger staff and volunteers and they wanted someone to witness that they had handled the crosses respectfully.

On January 31, 2006, we were led to a pallet in the Beverly Beach State Park maintenance barn. The crosses were clean. They were interlaced on the pallet, their names face up. The straw hat, the baseball caps, the flags, the Stock Market book, a few shoes, they were all there. Joseph Blickenstaff's cross was on the top.

John took them home.

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