



Pastor George Sawyer (left) accompanies Josh Rath's casket at the January funeral.

John Godbey/The Decatur Daily



Top: Josh spends time with his sister Julia and fiancée Kimberly Taylor when home on leave.

Right: The Rath children: Joy, Joel, Jimmy, Josh and Julia

Far right: Josh liked to bring gifts to youngest sibling Julia.



Sister Joy (left), fiancée Kimberly Taylor (center) and mother Darlene Rath clutch American flags at the funeral.

John Godbey/The Decatur Daily

Kimberly Taylor had been dating Josh Rath for five years. The couple originally planned to wed this month — before the Army extended Rath's deployment in Afghanistan another year. Rath, who already had been stationed in Germany, Kuwait and Iraq, didn't want Taylor to have to move from place to place as a military wife. So when he returned home on leave last December, the couple decided to delay their wedding until June 2010. By then he would be discharged and the couple could settle down.

That wedding will never take place. On Jan. 8, less than three weeks after returning to Afghanistan and only nine days

who lived his life to the fullest."

"Life is not always measured by its duration, but its donation," says George Sawyer, pastor of Calvary Assembly of God, the church the Rath family attends in Decatur, Ala. "Josh served the Lord, he had an impact on friends, and his life had purpose and significance."

Josh was one of five children, the oldest of three sons born to Leroy and Darlene Rath. Loved ones are grateful that he didn't have a lingering, excruciating death. The concussion blast killed him instantly. It didn't leave any external wounds, allowing for an open casket at the funeral.

His death struck praying family and friends especially hard because Josh already had escaped two close brushes with death in Iraq related



soldier is difficult to endure, even for people of faith, such as Josh's 56-year-old father, a dock operator at a petroleum chemical plant.

"I couldn't have asked for a better son who loved the Lord," says Leroy, who also has experienced the death of his mother and a brother. "When a son dies, there is so much more of a hurt and sadness. There's nowhere else to turn but to Jesus."

Darlene says God equipped the family the night before the killing at a powerful Wednesday night prayer service. "Pastor prayed for

WHEN A SOLDIER DOESN'T COME HOME

BY JOHN W. KENNEDY

before his 23rd birthday, Rath died in a marketplace bombing.

"We were completely devoted to one another; we had all these plans," says 24-year-old Taylor, Rath's first and only girlfriend. "Now I feel so empty. There's a pain in my soul. He was the most kind-hearted, selfless man I've ever met."

Rath's family members also experience that emptiness, an emptiness felt by more than 4,900 American families who have lost a relative in Afghanistan or Iraq. Although the burden eases a bit as the months go by, the Rath family and Taylor still are stricken at times with a profound sadness because of the life that has been taken from them.

"He was a soldier, he was a hero," says Taylor, who manages a group home for autistic children. "But he was more than that. He was a really good Christian man

to nearby improvised explosive device bombs. In the last incident, a sergeant friend sitting next to him bled to death after an explosion blew his legs off.

Those who knew Josh well use the same adjectives to describe him: generous, loving, caring, competitive, good-natured, athletic, sociable, daring. He joined the Army after graduating from high school in 2004 because he felt a duty to serve. In four years, he rose rapidly through six ranks from private to staff sergeant.

"This young man understood the dangers," says Sawyer, who founded Calvary Assembly of God 28 years ago. "He considered it to be worth the risk. He died in a noble cause, protecting us, including those who disagree with war. We're safer because of his heroism."

Yet Sawyer, 55, says such a violent tragic death of a beloved young

a steadfast spirit for the congregation, and that prepared us for the news of the next day," she says.

Josh was on a dismounted foot patrol scouting when a suicide bomber in Maywand, Afghanistan, detonated a device that killed Josh, another soldier and three civilians.

Josh's body didn't arrive back in Alabama for a week, adding to the grief. Yet Sawyer says an overriding sense of God's peace pervaded the funeral.

"Fellow soldiers told me they looked to Josh as a leader always concerned with the welfare of people for whom he was responsible," says Sawyer, who officiated at the service attended by 1,000 mourners.

Onlookers lined both sides of the highway on the snowy day, waving American flags as the funeral procession made its way from the church to the cemetery.

WHEN A SOLDIER DOESN'T COME HOME

Josh's outgoing personality allowed him to make friends with Christians and non-Christians alike.

"He lived his faith," Darlene says. "He thought loving people was the most important thing." She notes that 10 of Josh's friends told her they considered her son their best friend.

The tenderhearted Josh enjoyed lavishing presents upon his friends and relatives, especially younger sister Julia, now 13. When he came home on leave he brought expensive gifts such as an American Girl doll or a Vera Bradley purse.

"He would act tough and cool, but I saw him take off that big, tough shell," Julia said at the funeral.

Darlene, who postponed plans to return to college to obtain a special education degree because of Josh's death, says she takes comfort in Jesus' example of living a relatively short 33 years on earth.

"If Jesus had lived a year longer,

He would have healed many more people, He would have done so much more good," says Darlene, 53. "But it was His time. He had finished the work He had to do. I'm grateful for the life Josh had, and the time I had with him."

Taylor, who graduated in 2007 with a psychology degree from the University of Alabama, plans to attend graduate school in Chicago in preparation for a career as a psychologist. That's what Josh wanted, she says. Taylor, who continues to visit Josh's grave almost every day, says spending extended time with members of the Rath family following the tragedy has strengthened her faith in God.

"I'm just trying to get through one day at a time," she says. "This is something I will never recover from. I can look to the Lord, and His guidance will comfort me, but the pain and sorrow will never cease."

Darlene says she copes by journaling a lot and talking to friends. "People at church have been holding us up in prayer," she says. Darlene advises parents to cherish the years they have with their young children.

"The night I had to sit up all night and hold Josh because he had an earache, I wouldn't trade for anything," she says. "Every day we have with little ones is a gift."

Still, she keeps an eternal perspective.

"When I look to the future, I'm tempted to say it's too bad Josh isn't here to enjoy this," she says. "But Josh isn't missing anything, because he is with the Lord." **tpe**

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Making Mount Rushmore

Talk about a really big idea! Years ago, Mount Rushmore was just a huge slab of rock in the hills of South Dakota. Then someone thought of creating a giant sculpture so more people would visit the area.

Artist Gutzon Borglum agreed to do the work. In 1927, he started sculpting the faces of four U.S. presidents: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln. He created a plaster model of how he wanted it to look. Then he used dynamite to blast away chunks of rock. It was dangerous work!

After the dynamite was used, the faces were carefully chiseled and worked until they were as smooth as a new sidewalk.

In time, the sculpture started to take shape. But things didn't always go as planned. Thomas Jefferson was

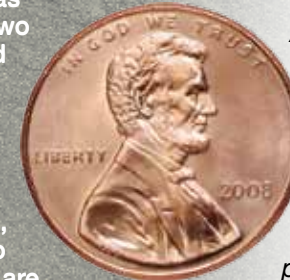


started on the right side of George Washington. But after two years of work, Jefferson started to crack. The artist blasted away the image and restarted it on Washington's left.

The last of the faces was dedicated on July 2, 1939. People cheered and fireworks exploded as the four figures were viewed together for the first time. Today the monument is seen by millions of visitors each year.

Your face may never be carved in stone for others to see, but you will always be very important to God. The One who made you loves you and thinks about you all the time. You are His treasured creation.

"I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands" (Isaiah 49:15,16, NIV).



Did you know?

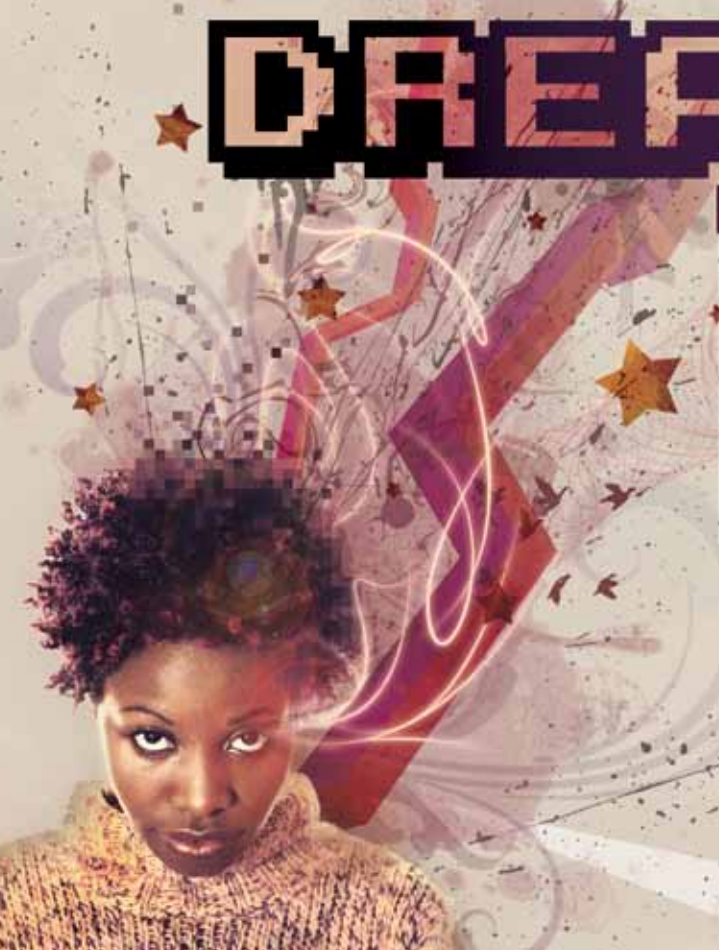
A young girl once wrote Abraham Lincoln a letter suggesting he grow a beard. He decided it was a good idea.

Mount Rushmore got its first bath in 2005. A cleaning crew scrubbed away dirt and tiny plants called lichens. The plants produce an acid that can damage rock over time.

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