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'Unanimously loved': MU student remembered at candlelight vigil

BY KYLE BROWN *Apr 7, 2015*



Loren Elliott

Beta Theta Pi brother Max Rowe, left, is comforted by fellow chapter member Nick Swoboda after speaking during a vigil Monday, April 6, held in remembrance of Paul Miltenberger. Miltenberger, a sophomore fraternity member, was killed in a hit and run on April 5 in his hometown of Dallas.

COLUMBIA — As dusk approached Monday night, all that was audible from the lawn in front of Beta Theta Pi fraternity house were cars whirring past on College Avenue.

MU students with wilted faces shuffled along the sidewalk while darkness fell in advance of a candlelight vigil to remember MU student Paul Miltenberger, 20, of Southlake, Texas, who died early Sunday in a hit-and run in Dallas.

Miltenberger was crossing East Mockingbird Lane about 2:20 a.m. when a black Dodge Charger heading west in the center lane hit him, according to a release from the Dallas Police Department. Miltenberger was not using a crosswalk.

According to the release, the driver did not stop to assist Miltenberger. The Dallas police had been unable to identify the driver as of Monday morning.

Beta Theta Pi chapter president Sam Gerlach said Miltenberger was visiting his family in Southlake for Easter. Miltenberger was studying business and was on track to graduate in 2017.

The front porch of the house was empty leading up to the vigil, save for a shrine to Miltenberger made up of a podium draped with the Texas flag, pink lilies at its foot. To the left was a picture of him on an easel. A black veil hung around the front door.

Miltenberger's fraternity brothers steadily filed onto the porch, wearing dark blazers and khakis. A few held their heads in their hands as they walked through the foyer of the house. Once the podium was flanked with men, Gerlach took the stage to begin the ceremony.

"This is a testament to what Paul meant to this community," Gerlach said, addressing the more than 100 people.

Gerlach introduced Kyle Richter, a minister at The Crossing.

"Life is no accident," Richter said. "Paul's life was a gift, and Paul used that gift to bless the people around him."

At three points during his sermon, Richter had everyone bow in quiet reflection and prayer; sniffing perforated the silence each time.

"And so now we mourn because it is right to grieve," Richter said. "In the midst of our grief, Jesus gives us hope."

Miltenberger's fraternity brothers took the podium to share their stories about him.

MU student Max Rowe spoke first. He had driven Miltenberger to St. Louis so he could catch his flight to Dallas this past weekend.

Everyone who spoke about Miltenberger brought up his sense of humor.

Rowe said that before heading to St. Louis, Miltenberger suggested picking up Coronas for the ride so they could get a head start on celebrating the weekend. The anecdote drew a round of teary-eyed laughter from the otherwise solemn group.

One of Miltenberger's dreams was to open a food truck named "Tacos and Tequila," Rowe said. True to its name, the menu would have consisted solely of tacos and José Cuervo tequila.

Rowe's last memory of Miltenberger was driving him to the airport. An hour before he had to catch his flight, Miltenberger alerted Rowe that he needed a ride. So they went.

Before leaving for the terminal, Miltenberger told Rowe he would need to be picked up at 9:30 p.m. Sunday. Rowe agreed, under the condition that he could drive Miltenberger's truck.

"He said, 'Eff no,'" Rowe recalled. "I'll hitchhike home before I let you drive Big Tex."

Rowe closed his speech saying that even though the two had only met in August, Miltenberger was the best person he had ever met.

"No one will be as funny as Paul, as unanimously loved as him," Rowe said.

MU students Cole Montgomery and Nick Swoboda also shared their sentiments.

Montgomery said that when Miltenberger came to Columbia from Texas, he didn't know anyone, and the brothers at Beta Theta Pi didn't know much about him, either.

"It wasn't until we saw Paul on the bed of a truck in Greektown, dancing and embracing the bid day atmosphere that we finally realized the personality we were getting ourselves into the next couple years," Montgomery said. "Paul quickly went from the 'I'm Paul, but you can call me P-Ro' to the stage where he was unanimously recognized as a unique spark of life that our class is missing now more than ever."

Swoboda emphasized Miltenberger's love for sports and his competitive nature. His sporting attitude carried into games of pool, basketball and golf, and when money was on the line, Miltenberger was sure to win.

MU student Sam Scorby closed the vigil, thanking all who came to remember Miltenberger. He let everyone know that counselors were available to anyone who needed to talk.

Afterward, the crowd of students pressed forward to embrace Miltenberger's fraternity brothers.

Although Miltenberger was not physically present, Montgomery stood assured that his spirit lingered on.

"If Paul wasn't too busy making friends in heaven right now, I'd know that we'd all have a guardian angel looking down on us until we meet again," Montgomery said.

Supervising editor is Bailey Otto.

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