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Retired teacher left major gift to Temple church and UMHB

By Mark Wingfield

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TEMPLE-When Memorial Baptist Church set out to relocate, the congregation had no idea the tragedy that would befall it in 2003. Nor could it have imagined the incredible gift it would receive in the same year.

Most Texas Baptists know Memorial as the church that suffered a fatal bus accident on Valentine's Day. Johnie Punchard knew Memorial as the church that cared for her in her youth and college years.

Punchard carried that love unspoken for more than 65 years, as well as appreciation for her alma mater, the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor in nearby Belton.

Punchard, who devoted 50 years to teaching business students, died July 26, 2002, in Baytown, where she had been a highly respected teacher at Robert E. Lee High School.

Johnie Punchard

Unknown to the church or the university, Punchard had arranged for the

bulk of her estate to benefit the two Texas Baptist entities. Her will directed a \$50,000 gift to Robert E. Lee High School, with the remainder of her estate to be divided between Memorial Baptist Church and UMHB.

The church and the university each recently received an initial \$500,000 from the estate, and each will receive a significant additional sum when the estate has been settled.

The university has created two endowed scholarships with the initial funds, one scholarship named for Punchard and the other named for her sister, Frances Punchard McCulloch.

“This was a wonderful surprise for the university,” said UMHB President Jerry Bawcom. “Her professional career indicates her strong commitment to education, and now students for generations will be able to receive an education as a result of the scholarships she established.”

In Temple, surprise hardly describes the reaction of Memorial Baptist Church, where a mostly graying congregation had been planning to relocate to a more accessible facility. Although the building fund had accumulated a fair amount of contributions, the relocation was to be done in phases to stay within budget.

Then came the bus wreck that killed five beloved church members and two others on a rain-slicked I-35. Despite the tragedy, despite the grief, the congregation vowed to keep moving forward.

In that resolve, little did they know that a seed planted more than six decades earlier would give them such a boost. Punchard's will specifically stated her desire to help the church add an educational building.

“It looks like the Lord has laid it out pretty plain what he wants done,” said Pastor Roy Parker. “We are extremely grateful to God that he did this. We had no idea.”

In the lows and highs of the past five months, Parker said he sees God's will surfacing. "Even in the tragedy, God has brought so much out of that."

Punchard had been a member of Memorial Baptist Church in the 1930s, as a teenager and then as a student at UMHB, where she graduated with honors. She was raised on a farm in Bell County, near Rogers.

She went on to earn a master's degree from Baylor University and a doctor of philosophy degree from the University of Houston.

"If she ever came back to visit this church, and surely she did, I have not been able to find anyone who remembers that," Parker said.

That would not be inconsistent with descriptions of Punchard's life—profoundly influencing students in the classroom but having few social interactions outside school.

Parker and others who have researched Punchard's life found no evidence she ever joined another church or participated in any social organizations other than Eastern Star. She never married.

Although she had neighbors who cared for her, she outlived most of her contemporaries and immediate family. Her parents and sister preceded her in death, and her only living relatives are distant cousins.

She retired from teaching in 1984. In her home were found letters written by former students, thanking Punchard for putting them on the right path.

"When I was in your class of business math ... I felt very unworthy of myself," one student wrote in 1976. "But you had a way of making me feel very worthwhile."

The student explained how she married, divorced and lost her first child by judicial order. "I tried suicide, but something wouldn't let me finish it."

Finally, the student became a Christian, she wrote, explaining that Jesus “has given me a sweet peace and a knowing that I am loved and cherished by him.”

And she credited Punchard with setting the first example for her. “I saw in you something I wanted for myself. And now I believe that I have what it was that I saw in you.”

In her privacy, Punchard lived frugally, saving seemingly everything. Her home reportedly was filled with a lifetime collection.

“Her mother and dad had a home here in Temple,” Parker explained. “She left everything just like it was when they died. That was 30 or 40 years ago. ... Things were in the house just like back then. The old car was still in the garage.”

The business teacher's frugality paid off, however, resulting in an estate of far greater wealth than typically expected of a high school teacher.

Her wealth was not amassed in a single high-performing stock or any other unusual way, according to officials at the Baptist Foundation of Texas, who served as administrator of the estate.

Punchard's silent witness will continue to bear fruit in the lives of students through her scholarship funds at UMHB. And at Memorial Baptist, Pastor Parker feels certain her generosity will impact students young and old.

“We were planning to build a satellite (location) because we did not have enough money to build the whole thing,” he said. “With this money, we feel like we'll be able to build a facility large enough that we can completely relocate and still have room to grow.”

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