

A place to mourn lost lives

Memorial to children who have died opens in Mankato

By Amanda Dyslin Free Press Staff Writer

MANKATO - Cathy Anderson's pain hasn't lessened in the six years since her son died, but it isn't as sharp, she said.



Luke Gronneberg

Mary Cords holds a candle to light Sunday afternoon in remembrance of her son, Charles, who died as a child. Cords was joined by dozens of other family members and friends of children who have died at the One Bright Star Children's Memorial dedication in Ray Erlandson Park.

Anderson's son, Daniel, drowned in the Minnesota River at Sibley Park June 23, 1997, when he was 14. His body was missing for three days before authorities found him. He would be turning 21 Oct. 1.

"The worst thing you could think of would be to forget — to forget for even a second about your son or what he was like," Anderson said. "I always think of things like, 'How tall would he be?' 'Would he have a girlfriend?' 'What would he look like?'"

"You can't do anything about the death of your child, but you can always remember and you can reach out to others who are going through something similar."

The incredible grief that Anderson has coped with has been made easier, she said, by One Bright Star. The organization is an area nonprofit dedicated to helping loved ones of children who have died.

Anderson and many other families who have suffered a similar tragedy memorialized their lost children Sunday afternoon in Ray Erlandson Park. A large monument — built around a stone star set in a pool of water and surrounded by a circular brick wall — was dedicated to all children who have died and the families and friends who have suffered the loss.

The memorial has plaques with names and pictures of children who have died, including Daniel Anderson, embedded in many of the bricks.

"This is just perfect," Anderson said. "This is comforting, and people have a place to go to think about their child besides the cemetery."

One Bright Star president Jan Backland, other members and dozens of volunteers worked for more than two years to bring the Children's Memorial to the park. Mayor Jeff Kagermeier, the architect for project, facilitated the event.

"The tenacity of this group and the mission and the cause is amazing," Kagermeier said. "I can't even tell you how touching this is on every single level."

Kagermeier said the wall that wraps around the stone star represents the unity and continuity of family. The star, with one elongated arm, stands for a lost child reaching down from heaven, the traditional symbol of a lost child.

One Bright Star was founded five years ago by four mothers, including Backland, who all had lost a child. The idea of the memorial stemmed from the purposes of their organization: to remember children who have died and to let parents, families and friends to know that it is OK to grieve.

"We wanted to offer a symbol for all the children who have been lost and all the grieving families and friends," said Sue Prosser, One Bright Star chairperson.

The service included dedication of engraved plaques for individual children who have died and a candle-lighting ceremony by parents and families. About 200 people attended.

The Mankato City Council approved Erlandson Park for the memorial in July 2001 and the groundbreaking ceremony was two months later. Construction of the monument began in May of this year and was finished Saturday.

The stone came in five pieces and weighs more than 6 tons.