

March of 2007 was a tragic and life-altering period in Cynthia Brown Byrd's life, one that calls back the pain fifteen years later.

On March 5, she was at her beloved mother's bedside as she passed away. She remembers thinking at the time that the next day would be her youngest son Brandon's twentieth birthday.

"I hope momma doesn't die on my son's birthday; that would be too hard for me," was an unexpected, intrusive thought.

On March 12, Byrd and her siblings laid their mother to rest.

"My son Brandon was an honorary pallbearer at his grandmother's homegoing services. He walked around like a young preacher, so quiet and respectful."

Her next words tumble out in a memory of pain and loss.

"Two weeks and one day after Brandon's twentieth birthday, and just sixteen days after my mother passed, I received terrible news."



by Mary Ann Hutcheson

Remembering

Brandon LaVar Byrd

"Do the Right Thing"

March 21st

"I was at work on the night of March 21, and Brandon wanted to see the movie 300 with some friends. At first, I told him no." After some thought, she gave him permission, reminding him that they needed to be up early the following morning. She adds, "Now if I had told him no, that would have been fine with him; that was it. My kids knew my yes was 'yes', and my no meant 'no'. And my son Brandon was such a good kid, a really good kid. I trusted him."

Brandon dressed and got ready to leave, telling his sister Kym, "I'm leaving; ma will

be home soon.” As Cynthia was leaving for home, she heard the night shift employees talking about “that bad accident” on Interstate 26 and how no one could have survived it. They were talking about the road being closed off. Her route home did not include the Interstate, and she didn’t think further about the accident. Later at home, she explains, “The doorbell rang, and I said to Kym, ‘I wonder why Brandon’s ringing that bell?’”

“When I opened the door, there was a highway patrolman and a minister, or priest—a religious official.” Cynthia asked herself, ‘What in the world are they doing here?’ The patrolman asked, “Ms. Byrd. Do you have a son named Brandon Byrd?” A state of shock and denial took hold, preparing her for something she was not ready to hear. She had just lost her mother and had barely had time to grieve. She told the visitors to please wait, that she was not ready. She tried to get her daughter to leave the room, but Kym wanted to be with her mom. So, Cynthia moved to the kitchen, sat at the table and grabbed a cold drink to take her blood pressure medication. At least fifteen minutes passed before she was ready to return.

The patrolman asked again, “Do you have a son named Brandon Byrd?”

“Yes.”

“Does he drive a blue car?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Cynthia has little memory of what happened next; it all became a terrifying blur. Kym rushed outside to call family, sharing the horrible news. Cynthia ended up in the emergency room with Kym by her side. Over and over ran the same internal message, “Brandon is such a good kid... this can’t be Brandon.” She slept for three days, telling her family she didn’t want to wake up. Well-meaning family and friends came to the house and the continuous ringing of the doorbell was upsetting. Her family finally posted a sign asking visitors to please knock instead.

“I lost those days,” she says. Numb from shock, and unable to make arrangements for the funeral, Cynthia needed serious support. Her son’s older brother stepped in and arranged for his casket. “It was a pain you can’t even describe,” she remembers. “The loss is gut-wrenching. It tears at you like a needle constantly jabbing, multiplied by fifty.”

For the next six years she was unable



to travel that section of the interstate. During that time, she kept her son’s phone active so he would have it “when he returned.” Anyone who has experienced extreme loss can relate to that grief process. The thought of moving forward after such terrible pain makes us cling to whatever our heart tells us.

The “Dark Place”

Those who knew Brandon remember an enthusiastic learner with a big smile. He was a devout Christian who left the porch light on for his mother and once told Cynthia after getting her hair done, “Mom, you’re so pretty, it looks like you’re going to the prom.” A positive person, his favorite saying was, “Do the right thing.”

Brandon took his education seriously. He was on the principal’s list at Dutch Fork High School and a recipient of a government Life Scholarship, which he used to attend Midlands Technical College. Because of his academic achievement, Brandon was named to the scholar’s list while pursuing a career in radiology.

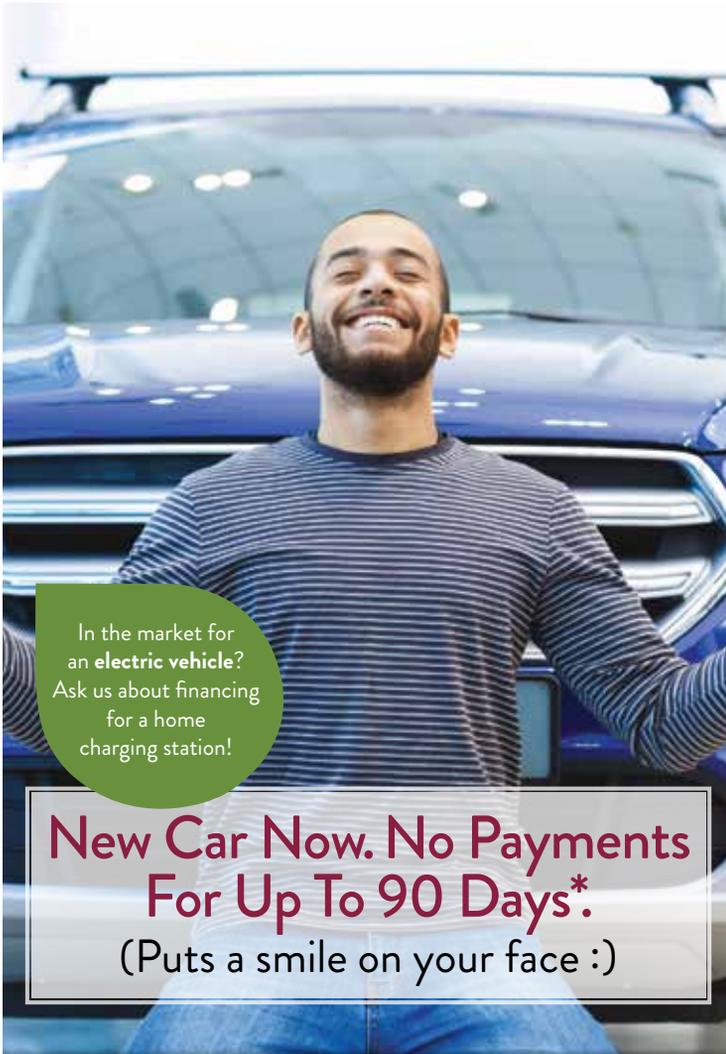
At the time of his death, Brandon was six weeks into his employment as a radiology transporter at Lexington Medical Center’s Radiology Department. His manager had recently asked Cynthia if he could offer Brandon a part-time position that would allow benefits because he was doing such a great job. The family was thrilled with the news, though not surprised; they knew Brandon was a vibrant, hard-working young man. Sadly, the paperwork arrived too late.

Cynthia was barely making it through each day. The pain and loss of her beloved son, so soon after the loss of her mother, was taking her to what she called her “dark place.” Life no longer seemed important. Concerned for his sister, her older brother told her, “I know I don’t know how you feel, but we all loved Brandon. I know you’re going to cry. But can you do one thing for me? Can you cry on your feet? Can you try to do that?” She remembers saying, “I’ll try, big brother.”

“I know what he wanted me to do,” she remembers. “He wanted me to stop closing the curtains, stop not answering the phone, stop not letting people come in the house. He saw where I was going with my pain, and he was concerned. Her brother’s words got her going. She said, ‘I cried, but I got out of that bed; I did it on my feet! I hug my brother now when we do things, and I say, ‘Are you proud of me?’” He answers, “Yeah, you’re doing it; I’m so proud of you.”

Healing Through Charity

What Cynthia’s brother meant by “doing it” was her staying on her feet for the past fifteen years while turning her grief into life-affirming charity towards others. Five months after her loss, Cynthia decided that she wanted her son’s name somewhere as a living testimony to his life force. Education was a priority in her home, and the family spent countless hours in the library. She contacted the Richland County Public Library for information related to donations. “The library represents what Brandon stood for,” she said. Once she knew what was



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needed to help the library, her quest was on. “Now, I’m going to get that money,” she said. And she did. From that first step came the “Remembering Brandon LaVar Byrd” projects that have mushroomed into fifteen years of charitable projects, fund-raisers, fashion shows, and more.

Cynthia, Brandon’s brother London, and sister Kym needed to do something positive to work through their loss, so they coordinated school supply drives at Seven Oaks Elementary School, collecting much-needed school supplies for children and raising money for the library. Cynthia and her family also raised \$17,500 for the Richland County Public Library to support ongoing programs and projects at the library. One of the meeting rooms at the St. Andrews Regional Branch is named for Brandon, and one of the twenty-four trees in the indoor garden has been dedicated to his memory. To raise money that first year, she decided to do a fashion show, starting with “just regular people.”

“I encouraged people to get up there on that stage,” she remembers. She went to different clothing businesses, asking to borrow clothes and accessories for the event. Once people realized her purpose for borrowing, they warmly gave from their hearts. The first program started small at the community center, with a \$7.00 admittance fee. “We raised \$3,000 that first time,” she said. “Then we did additional yearly shows until we got up to our last fashion show in 2016. It was hard work, but so much fun.” One of her most exciting fashion shows involved using Midland Technical College’s auditorium, which seats 400 people. No one thought she could fill the space. She said, “I know I can’t fill it myself; sure can’t. But we’re going to get it!” And she did.



model and help them raise money. She says, “We ended up with a plastic surgeon, an ER doctor, a podiatrist, a gastroenterologist, and a former pilot. I put their pictures on the flyer. And of course, Brandon’s picture as well.” The show was a huge success, and everyone had a great time. Brandon’s picture adorns every flyer, as well as all media stories about her charity work. He is always the reason for her giving. And she makes sure his spirit is with her. “Brandon didn’t get a chance,” she says, “so I want to make it happen for others who need it.”

“This is the day that the Lord has made; I shall rejoice and be glad in it.”

An unsung hero, Cynthia Byrd Brown does not desire to draw attention to herself, but her cause. She has filled a neat and well-organized blue binder that tells the story of Brandon’s life. The photographs and stories build a picture of how he was beginning at childhood to how he has impacted the lives of others since he “transitioned” from one life to the

Award honor in Columbia Metropolitan publication, a Lexington Medical Center “Everyday Heroes” issue, etc. There are even flyers for her remarkably successful fund-raising fashion shows, and so much more all carefully inserted into individual clear plastic sheets. She has been interviewed by Columbia’s major news stations and lauded for her leadership roles in charitable programs like the Salvation Army, Mission Lexington (formerly LICS), Sister Care, Transitions, Seven Oaks Elementary School, Calhoun County school drives/supplies, just to name a few. Cynthia is most touched that Brandon’s church honored him with the Brandon LaVar Byrd Scholarship Fund.

Perhaps by learning from others like Cynthia who, with enormous courage and strength discovered how to turn tragedy into generosity we can help ourselves when difficult times arrive. Cynthia’s mother and son live on in her as she continues to give and find new ways to serve others. A friend who is a physician once told Cynthia, “Everybody wants to do something to help, but sometimes you just need someone else to do the work. And you’re that person. You just need some financial support. That’s what you have. You’re doing a great job!”

“When that police officer came to my house, it was the worst news ever,” recalls Cynthia. “Five months later I realized I had to do something to learn how to live again. From that time my passion to help others grew and grew and grew. Even after doing it for fifteen years, the minute I open my eyes every morning, I say, ‘This is the day the Lord has made; I shall rejoice and be glad in it.’ And I immediately take the covers off. You’ve got to get up and get moving.” ■

“When I lost my son, I was given a lemon – so I told myself I could remain silent and just live my life that way, or I could add sugar and make lemonade, and do something positive about it. That’s when we came up with the toy drive, adopting a highway and a scholarship fund.”
— Cynthia Byrd Brown

She found sponsors for the venue and assembled a foundation of artists and designers. Having worked with Lexington Medical Center for years, she was able to recruit doctors as “men of distinction” to

next. There are photographs, philanthropy awards, letters of appreciation, news stories, awards, a Richland resolution letter for her good deeds from the Richland County Council, a Best of Philanthropy