

Chapter 1

A Community of Broken Dreams

by Mike Greider

“The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.”
— Eleanor Roosevelt

No one could have anticipated something like this. A tragedy so overwhelming that it would cripple Huntington, West Virginia, for decades to come.

Just after 7.30pm on November 14, 1970, Southern Airways flight 932 descended through rain, smoke and fog towards Huntington’s Tri-State Airport. Witnesses were reported to say that it seemed low as it passed over the Ashland Oil refinery. The flight data recorder would later indicate the crew may have tried to abort the landing and go round again¹. But it was too late. The DC-9 clipped trees on a high hill just two miles short of the runway. The plane rolled, then plunged nose-first into a gulley beside the Tolsia Highway. It exploded on impact. All 75 passengers and crew died. The whole tragedy happened in about five seconds.

Among the first on the scene were members of the West Virginia Army National Guard. Company B Commander Gary Bunn will never forget that night. “The heat was so intense, you couldn't get closer than 100 yards. It burned for a day or two... I still have nightmares,” Bunn said decades later in 2005². Ron Rutherford, a Company B sergeant major, also remembered, "I was in combat in Korea for over a year, and I never saw anything worse."

Flight 932 was carrying 37 members of the Marshall University Thundering Herd football team, 9 members of the coaching staff, 25 boosters, plus the flight crew. The accident was the deadliest tragedy affecting any sports team in U.S. history.

¹ ‘The story of the 1970 Marshall Plane Crash’ by Bob Withers, The Herald-Dispatch (Huntington); http://www.herald-dispatch.com/sports/marshall_plane_crash/the-story-of-the-marshall-plane-crash/article_5e22829b-e822-5952-add9-4bfd4a4cebc.html

² ‘National Guard Veteran can never forget that night’ by Bob Withers, The Herald-Dispatch (Huntington), Nov 13, 2005; http://www.herald-dispatch.com/sports/marshall_plane_crash/the_plane_crash/national-guard-veteran-can-never-forget-that-night/article_69dad6f9-e5ff-51ca-8e87-74d19ac390a6.html

Maybe you have heard about it. Maybe you saw the movie “We Are Marshall”. It told the true story of Huntington WV, a city which had already suffered from a dwindling economy and a shrinking population. Now in one tragic evening they had lost not only some of their best athletes but also some of the key business leaders in the community.

A tragedy of this magnitude does something to the soul of a community. The Mayor at that time said, “We will grieve until further notice”. Even 30 years later, lifelong Huntington resident Bob Bailey (himself a 1970 graduate of Marshall and by then President of Huntington City Council) said "People in this community lost their family and friends in the crash, and every November they feel the pain of it again. I don't think it will ever be forgotten."³

On November 12, 1972, the Marshall Memorial Fountain was dedicated on the university’s Huntington campus. Designed by Italian sculptor Harry Bertioia, it aims to remember the tragic loss but also to point towards purposeful life, upward growth, immortality, and eternity⁴. Yet decades later Huntington had still not shaken off the legacy of community trauma.

In July 2015, in an article titled “10 most miserable cities in America”⁵, Market Watch reported that the tri-state area of Huntington-Ashland (WV-Kentucky-Ohio) was the most unhealthy and depressed community in America across a range of indices.

This rating was determined on the basis of Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index data gathered in 2012-13 on hundreds of thousands of Americans across 189 metropolitan areas; combined with a 24/7 Wall St analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data on income, poverty, educational attainment, unemployment and violent crime.

Commenting on Huntington-Ashland’s Well-Being Index of only 59.5 out of 100, Market Watch summarized the findings as: *“Respondents were the most likely Americans to report*

³ ‘Community still feels the pain of MU plane crash’ by Beth Gorczyca, The Herald-Dispatch (Huntington), Dec 31, 1999; http://www.herald-dispatch.com/sports/marshall_plane_crash/the_plane_crash/community-still-feels-the-pain-of-mu-plane-crash/article_97a560d3-34a8-5206-9ece-9e7dcb286ba6.html

⁴ ‘Memorial Fountain designed to represent ‘upward growth, immortality, eternity’ by Bob Withers, The Herald-Dispatch (Huntington); http://www.herald-dispatch.com/sports/marshall_plane_crash/remembrances/memorial-fountain-designed-to-represent-upward-growth-immortality-eternity/article_3b6f5762-d95f-5da7-b2ab-9d7d2981ddc9.html

⁵ ‘10 most miserable cities in America’, Market Watch, July 27, 2015, Slide 1; <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/10-most-miserable-cities-in-america-2014-05-07>

physical health problems, with exceptionally high rates of diabetes, cancer diagnoses, and chronic pain. More than 34.4% reported high cholesterol, and 46.9% reported high blood pressure last year, both the most of any metro area and perhaps leading to the high rate of heart attacks reported. Nearly one in 10 people surveyed stated they had previously suffered a heart attack, more than in any other area. Nearly 40% reported they were obese last year, the highest rate in the nation. Similarly, no metro area scored worse for emotional health than Huntington, where residents were more likely to say they felt worried or depressed than anywhere else in America. Residents also had lower overall evaluations of their current lives and future prospects than respondents in any other metro area.”⁶

How depressing! Could a community with this kind of track record have any hope?

You might think it would take a move a God to change a community with these statistics. And you might be right. Yet God can change anything – indeed, everything!

A mere two years later, Huntington WV won 1st place in the America's Best Communities competition (with a \$3 million grand prize)!⁷

Back when Gallup-Heathway’s was collecting its data, it would have been unthinkable that Huntington-Ashland could even aspire to enter a contest like America’s Best Communities. This community revitalization campaign (sponsored by Frontier Communications, DISH Network, CoBank and The Weather Channel) encourages American small towns and cities to develop innovative solutions for revitalization and attracted entries from more than 350 communities across the nation.

One of the top five cities for College Graduates

In Planet Money’s Newsletter⁸ in 2021 sited Huntington WV as one of the five best cites for College graduates who are interested in the best cost of living. A fascinating new study by Stanford University economist Rebecca Diamond and University of

⁶ ‘10 most miserable cities in America’, Market Watch, July 27, 2015, Slide 11;
<https://www.marketwatch.com/story/10-most-miserable-cities-in-america-2014-05-07>

⁷ <http://www.cityofhuntington.com/residents/americas-best-communities/our-journey>

⁸ ‘The best and worst places you can live if you only care about money’ Planet Money Newsletter December 14, 2021 <https://www.npr.org/sections/money/2021/12/14/1063703904/the-best-and-worst-places-to-live-if-you-care-only-about-money>

California, Berkeley economist Enrico Moretti finds that Huntington and its surrounding area offer one of the highest standards of living in the U.S. for college graduates.

Diamond and Moretti explain, “*The conventional wisdom has long been that most workers — no matter their education or skills — should move to big metropolitan areas with lucrative, globally competitive industries, where they can get in on the action and climb the economic ladder. It's true that big cities offer every class of worker a bigger paycheck, whether they're populating spreadsheets at an office or flipping burgers at McDonald's. But there is, of course, another side to the equation: cost of living. Whether a place offers a good financial deal is like an arm-wrestling match between the income you can earn there and its cost of living.*”

You may be wondering who were the other four cities. They include; McAllen, Texas; Houston, Texas; Beaumont, Texas and Charleston, South Carolina.

It is incredible that a Huntington would be in the same category as some of these other communities who have been noted as such prosperous places. What has happened to their economy to explain this? Why were they chosen as America's Best Community?

So how could such a turnaround be possible?

Like most things of this nature, it did not happen overnight. Some would say that things started turning around 20 years before, when a group of pastors began to come together to dream and to pray for God to transform their community. When they began, they had no idea of the amazing way that God would turn the theme of the Marshall Memorial Fountain into a reality.

“Communities can be shaped by choice, or they can be shaped by chance. We can keep on accepting the kind of communities we get, or we can start creating the kind of communities we want.” – Richard Moe⁸

⁸ Quoted on <http://www.cityofhuntington.com/residents/americas-best-communities>