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Flight 1420 crash anniversary brings Ouachita Singers home

Jon Merryman

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OUACHITA BAPTIST UNIVERSITY



NEWS

For immediate release

Flight 1420 crash anniversary brings Ouachita Singers home



Pictured left to right, front to back – Row 1: Jim Simmons, Caroline Golden Simmons, Mark Simmons, Susanna Biegert Berrones; Row 2: Amy Gaden Taylor, David Stanley, Aaron Hawley, Etta Waller Linton, Kristen Clark Hutchins, Luke Hollingsworth; Row 3: Natalie Putnam Jagers, Misha Perkins Parker, Anna Lloyd, Jon Merryman, Barrett Baber; Row 4: Dustin Taylor, Tad Hardin, Kristin Maddox Cheng, Cindy Fuller, Charles Fuller, Sarah Fuller Phillips, Becky Fuller, Dave Ozmun. (Photo by Lori Motl)

By Jon Merryman

June 3, 2019

For more information, contact OBU's news bureau at newsbureau@obu.edu or (870) 245-5208.

ARKADELPHIA, Ark. — It's been 20 years since a group of Ouachita Baptist University students and three of their professors, returning from a mission trip to Europe, crashed on the final leg of their trip in Little Rock on American Airlines Flight 1420. Survivors returned to Arkadelphia this past weekend to mark the 20th anniversary of that fateful night, June 1, 1999.

"The term 'alma mater' literally means nourishing mother," said Ouachita President Ben Sells at the dinner opening the weekend's events. "I hope this weekend will be nourishing and healing for each of you."

Since the moment the plane crashed, Ouachita faculty and staff have been caring for students and staff of the Ouachita Singers group who survived. From a retreat just one month after the crash to help students process and begin to heal to meals and gatherings in the president's home during the years that followed, the group continued to strengthen their bond and support each other. The university continued their care, even 20 years later, by hosting this reunion weekend, including a dinner on campus, photos in the Rachel Fuller and Ouachita Singers Memorial Amphitheater on campus and spending the anniversary day together at DeGray Lodge. The gathering was what many called a "safe space" to share with each other through laughter and tears.

"Today I'm reminded that God's strength is made perfect through weakness," said survivor Tad Hardin

('99). "I didn't always know what that meant. I didn't always believe that people of faith were allowed to be broken. Twenty years after the crash, there's still much more that I still don't know. But I do know that I am blessed beyond measure to be alive ... to be a husband, father, teacher, mentor ... and to belong to a family of fellow survivors who are lifelong friends. Reconnecting with them this weekend fed my soul and reminded me that while our scars represent pain and sorrow, they also tell our story, and stories need to be shared."

Attending survivors shared testimonies of how God had worked in their lives since the crash, the joy of marriages and having children and thankfulness for the support of other survivors in the room helping them make it through the crash and the days, months and years after.

"If the only reason I'm still here is to be a dad, then that is more than enough for me and the greatest privilege of my life," shared Luke Hollingsworth ('02). "It's amazing to look at the picture of our group and then the picture with our families. That is truly a picture of the blessing of these past 20 years and a reminder of the influence and impact each of us has had on the world around us."

While the weekend was filled with fun memories of the mission trip the group was on before crashing on their return, there were also deep discussions of living with post-traumatic stress, struggling to get back on a plane and wrestling with their faith.

"I have wrestled with the hard questions of faith," shares survivor Misha Perkins Parker ('01). "Even then, God kept His promise, 'I will neither leave you nor forsake you.' And after wading through disappointments and struggles, there have been many seasons when I finally experienced the peace that passes understanding."

Before wrapping up the weekend, members of the group were already saying how they couldn't wait for the 30th reunion. The crash created a unique bond between all survivors but especially these Ouachita students.

"This weekend has given me the wonderful opportunity to ponder all the many blessings God brought my way," said Natalie Putnam Jagers ('02). "It has given me pause to praise Him for teaching me through the storms I've been blessed to walk, crawl and trudge through these past 20 years. I am thankful for the lives of each person who survived and those who died on flight 1420. I pray that their lives will continue to bring light and hope to this world."