

Out of order



Photos by Stan Carroll/The Commercial Appeal

Billy Watts (from front), Tracy Lindsey and Tim Stocking work recently on the curbing for Jessica's Garden at Queen of Peace Catholic Church in Olive Branch, dedicated to families of children who died before their parents.

Jessica's Garden remembers children who died too soon

By **TONI LEPESKA** / *Special to DeSoto Appeal*

THE FLOWER BED is shaped like a heart.

"Big heart because Jessica had a big heart," Leonard Temple said.

The young tree is a red maple. The leaves will turn color in the fall, in time for Jessica's October birthday.

The fence — where the plaques memorializing children who have died before their parents will be hung — is made of planks of redwood cedar to last "forever."

Jessica's Garden was initially conceived by Temple to memorialize Jessica Gresham, his fellow parishioner at Queen of Peace Catholic Church in Olive Branch. The DeSoto Central High School senior died in a car accident Nov. 15, 2009.

But then Temple, 51, father of two, realized just how many parents around him had lost their children — exposed to an out-of-order verdict that death had made in their lives.

He decided then to create a small garden that would memorialize any parent's child. That way, he said, the parents would know they are not alone and that others



Leonard Temple and Pat Laine discuss landscape options for the 80-foot cedar fence that serves as a backdrop to Jessica's Garden.

walk this path.

"This has been a moving thing for me," Temple said. "I could not let this girl's memory go. I wanted to share (the garden) with as many people as I could."

Jessica was in fourth or fifth grade when she met Temple and his wife at Queen of Peace.

The Temples were at a Saturday night Mass that was attended by Jessica and her grandmother. Jessica lived with her grandmother, Pat Laine, and her mother, Carol Prestridge.

As a youth, Jessica enrolled in a religious education program that Temple taught.

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GARDEN

"We watched her grow up," Temple said. "Every room Jessica went in, the room would light up immediately. She was always the one to help everybody out first, almost like a therapist."

In fact, she planned to go into a helping profession, her grandmother said. She was going to be a nurse practitioner.

"She always wanted to be around people, do things for people," Laine said. "She was just born that way."

Time did not fade Temple's memory of that rosy, caring disposition and the fact it had been cut short so soon in life. In time, Temple

began to focus on a plot of ground across the parking lot from the Queen of Peace building. He began talking about a garden to memorialize Jessica and others who died before their parents.

A church men's club paid for the heart-shaped flower bed. The lady's club promised money for benches. The red maple was planted. Brush was cleared.

Two cases of poison ivy and one incident with fire ants later, a group of six men and a few women set to work on the 11-post, 80-foot-long fence and put it up in one afternoon. Material costs were paid by two parishioners.

Newton's Trophy Corner in Memphis promised to provide at cost bronze plaques to be hung on the

fence, Temple said.

Karen Bobbitt, whose 24-year-old son Chad died of Hodgkin's lymphoma seven years ago, happened to be at the church and saw the work in progress.

The Olive Branch resident is familiar with the concept of a memorial garden. She said the one at St. Louis Catholic Church in Memphis gives her much comfort. She plans to memorialize her son at Queen of Peace, where she is a parishioner.

"I hope to find that same peace at Jessica's Garden," she said.

For Jessica's grandmother, the single red maple is the focus of the garden.

"I feel as if that tree is part of her," she said, "and its branches are her reaching out to comfort all the families."