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WATCH NOW: Oklahoma City bombing memorial moved from Gavit to Morton High School

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Seniors from Gavit Middle/High School redesigned and moved the Oklahoma City bombing memorial that was at G
AnnMarie Hilton, The Times

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HAMMOND — Government teacher Jeff Swisher said he isn't sure why the class of 1995 decided to build a memorial at Gavit Middle/High School to honor the victims of the Oklahoma City bombing, but students in the class of 2021 decided to keep remembering the victims despite Gavit's closure.

Each semester, Swisher said he takes the students in his government class out to see the memorial at Gavit. His students also need to complete a community-based project at the end of the semester, so this year some of them asked if they could preserve the memorial. About 10 students worked together to design a new memorial that now sits outside of Morton High School.

Outside door A, there is now a stone that reads, "In memory of the children that died in the Oklahoma City disaster." Around it is a circle of brick pavers and 19 lights to remember each of the children who died that day in 1995. A new tree was planted behind the stone that should grow to be about 6 feet tall.

The students who designed the new memorial said they had a different vision at first, but decided on this layout because of the symbolism behind it. Rather than going with the square layout of their first design, Scotty Hills-Montejano said they used a circle because it has no ending. The tree was added to the design to represent the kids' spirits continuing to live on, one student said.

At a dedication ceremony Tuesday, Swisher briefly explained what happened the morning of April 19, 1995, when a bomb went off at the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building at 9:02 a.m. killing 168 people — including 19 children — and injuring several hundred more. **According to the Federal Bureau of Investigations website**, it was "the worst act of homegrown terrorism in the nation's history."

A student at Tuesday's dedication read out the names of each of the 19 children, who ranged in age from 4 months to 5 years old. Another student laid a rose on the ground in front of the memorial for each name read.

Many of the students present remarked at how young the victims were. One student, Dwayne Washington, said that the Oklahoma City bombing isn't normally one of the first events that comes to mind when people think back on history, but it's "definitely something to remember." In the future, he hopes to bring his children back to see the memorial and remember those lost in the tragedy.

Swisher said he and the students did a Zoom call with the Oklahoma City National Memorial and Museum. The person they spoke with told them the museum wasn't even aware there were any memorials outside of Oklahoma City, Swisher said.

The FBI website said the surrounding area looked like a "war zone" after the bomb went off. Cars were incinerated and over 300 buildings were damaged or destroyed. But Swisher said one tree, now called **The Survivor Tree**, withstood the blast.

The museum has been able to clone the tree and is sending a sapling of it to Swisher and his class to be planted somewhere in Hammond.