Letting the sun back in
Memory garden brings healing, hope to family
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LIBERTY, N.C. -- On a large plot of land in Randolph County, a small garden sits outside a house that has been owned by the Williams family for generations.

A blue-and-white sign just outside the garden reads “Tanner Lee Williams, Sept. 28, 2003.” Two stone benches provide a quiet place to sit and remember a life that never was.

On Sept. 28, 2003, with just two weeks left in her pregnancy, Diana Gardner-Williams began having contractions. During labor, an ultrasound showed that there was no movement from the baby -- the umbilical cord was wrapped three times around Tanner’s neck.

When Gardner-Williams and her husband, Todd Williams, were told Tanner was stillborn, all the dreams they had had for their son vanished in an instant.

“The happiest day of our lives when we found out we were pregnant,” said Gardner-Williams. “His name was picked out as soon as we found out it was boy … so his identity was well established by Sept. 28.”

In the months that followed, the Williamses struggled to deal with their grief. Neither had practiced the Christian faith in many years -- Gardner-Williams was raised Catholic, while her husband was raised Methodist.

“It was really hard for us, because we didn’t have a faith to fall back on,” said Gardner-Williams. “Tanner’s death brought me to St. Pius.”

Shortly before Christmas, Gardner-Williams found herself at St. Pius X Church in nearby Greensboro.

Although she had not been to Mass or reconciliation in nearly 20 years, Gardner-Williams entered the confessional and poured out her grief and guilt to Msgr. Anthony Marcaccio, pastor.

“I thought (Tanner’s death) was a punishment,” said Gardner-Williams. “He (Msgr. Marcaccio) said God is merciful and is not out to punish us.”

Msgr. Marcaccio recommended she read Psalm 51 -- “Wash away all my guilt; from my sin cleanse me. …A clean heart create for me, God.”

In addition to the comfort she found at her new church, Gardner-Williams discovered help at the Haven of Hope and Healing, a nonprofit pregnancy and infant loss center in Graham, N.C.

Just a month after losing Tanner, the Williamses, both landscape designers, began planting a “memory garden” on Williams’ parents’ property to honor Tanner.

Working on weekends for the next six months, the Williamses created a beautiful, peaceful garden where they can sit and remember their son.

A family friend made a cross out of cedar, and next to it a wooden stand displays a picture of Tanner. Wind chimes and metal butterflies surround the garden’s perimeter.

The Williamses planted 30 varieties of flowers and trees, most of them white to symbolize hope and purity. The garden was designed so that whatever the season, plants are always blooming -- from snow bells in January, through gardenias in summer, to Christmas Lenten Roses.

On May 15, 2004, about 50 friends and family members gathered to celebrate the dedication of Tanner’s memory garden.

Gardner-Williams said the date holds special significance, because May 15 is the feast of St. Isidore the Farmer, patron of farmers and rural communities. Isidore married a young woman who also became a saint, Maria de la Cabeza, and they also had a son who died as a child.

Over time, the Williamses were renewed in their faith and are now active members of St. Pius X Church. They designed and installed a memory garden at the church for parishioners to enjoy.

Just four months after the heartbreaking loss of Tanner, the Williamses found out they were pregnant again.

They weren’t trying to conceive, and the second pregnancy brought more anxiety than joy.

“We got pregnant too soon, but I’m glad we did,” Gardner-Williams said.

On Oct. 17, 2004, a healthy son, Shivere Joseph Williams, was born. Shivere is a derivative of two Hebrew names meaning “gift of God” and “truly giving.”

Last summer, the Williamses built a home just 400 feet away from Williams’ parents’ home, where Tanner’s garden is planted. The family often comes and sits in the garden to remember the son they lost, and celebrate the son they now have.

“Tanner brought about so much good in our lives,” said Gardner-Williams. “I’d rather have him here, but we wouldn’t be participating and taking classes at church ... we’re more open spiritually.”

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