

Resurrection Labyrinth: One woman’s mark, Valpo’s lasting art

Faith, dedication, love begin describing Nicole Unrath’s life

Audrey White
audrey.white@valpo.edu

‘Smile big because God loves you and so do I!’ was ‘03 Valpo alum Nicole Unrath’s signature phrase.

A graduate of Valpo’s elementary education program, Unrath tragically passed away in a car accident several weeks into her teaching career at Tinker Elementary School at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Fla. Yet, even in the time she spent with her students, she left a beautiful imprint upon their lives through her endearing kindness.

“Her life exemplified bringing people together. There was no enemy. She was very childlike and that’s why being a kindergarten teacher was [meant] for her, and those kids saw it right away. They had already written and acknowledged what a loving soul she was,” retired Valparaiso University pastor Joseph Cunningham said.

Unrath touched the lives of each person who had the blessing of knowing her. Her mother, Anita Unrath, described her as a “born teacher”, as she had taught her brother, John Unrath, everything she had learned when she returned home from school when they were young children.

As a devoted follower of Christ, she actively participated

in worship services at The Chapel of The Resurrection. She carried roles as an acolyte and served as a member of the morning prayer staff and prayer team, a leader of the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, led Bible studies and participated in volunteer work at the Chapel.

“If you had gone to the Chapel sometime in the four years she was here, you either said ‘she’s a great friend’ or ‘she’s a friendly leader,’” friend of Nicole Unrath and Professor of Mathematics and Statistics Lara Pudwell said.

Not only was she a warmhearted individual, but she was a loyal friend and community-oriented. Famous for her tea parties and chocolate chip cookies, Nicole Unrath never failed to spread joy wherever she went, working to bring people together.

“I think that one of her spiritual gifts was showing Jesus’ love, and that’s what she lived doing,” Anita Unrath said.

Pudwell shared her memories of their friend group and of the time they lived together. She recalled her cherished recollections of building a blanket fort, enjoying “Berg” waffles for brunch following Chapel and how Nicole Unrath showed love through traditions.

“Nicole Unrath had grown up with St. Nicholas’s Day as a tradition in her family. She told everybody on the second floor of Brandt, ‘stick out your shoes, St. Nicholas’s Day is coming’. People had no idea what that was, but they left their shoes outside their door and Nicole Unrath got up early to put



treats in everyone’s shoes to pass along a tradition that she loved. That kind of community building was default for her. She was good for good-natured fun,” Pudwell said.

Coming from a Valparaiso University family and growing up all over the world, outside of the Chapel is the perfect place for the Labyrinth to sit.

“Nicole Unrath’s sense of home was complicated,” Pudwell said.

The Unrath family moved often because of Pastor Tom Unrath’s career as an ELCA Air Force Chaplain. As a result, Nicole Unrath began school in New Jersey, then moved four times, twice outside the United States. Anita Unrath refers to her as a “third-culture kid”, meaning an adolescent who is American by birth, but has grown up living in a foreign culture. Because of her experiences living abroad, Nicole Unrath was able to connect with other students from international backgrounds. Furthermore, her parents, ‘77 alumni, met during their college years and married during graduation weekend. Today, the Unrath couple resides in Florida.

Unrath’s brother, John Unrath helped in designing the Labyrinth we know today. The goal was to create a unique form that retained a familiar sense of what a traditional labyrinth looked like. Due to other designs that were too large or too expensive to pursue, John Unrath worked alongside labyrinth constructor Robert Ferré, until they reached a conclusion.

“By modifying Robert’s five-circuit design, the defining feature of the Resurrection Labyrinth really came through--its uniquely cruciform path,” John Unrath said.

The Labyrinth’s distinctive design speaks to the reality of

our spiritual lives.

“There are long stretches of straight paths, without twists and turns, but in the other areas, the path takes many turns and is almost disorienting at times. This was intentional- it mimics the paths our lives take as Christians. Sometimes, we are very much on a straight path following Christ’s example, but other times we wind up on a very twisted path. Yet in every instance, what brings us back to our Christian center is focusing on the Cross,” John Unrath said.

With a simplistic, yet detailed configuration, the art of labyrinths have long been used for prayer since the Middle Ages. Conversely, most labyrinths do not have a present theme. The Resurrection Labyrinth, however, incorporates the “I AM” verses from Holy Scripture.

“The whole idea of a labyrinth can be of a prayerful meditation. It can be a time to talk to God. It can be a time to just walk and get insight. It’s very calming and it’s not [intended] to confuse you. There’s only one way in and there’s one way out,” Anita Unrath said.

The Unrath couple imparted that there is no incorrect way to walk a labyrinth.

“A maze is someplace that is confusing and you can get lost in. A labyrinth like [the Resurrection Labyrinth] is just one way in, you stay on the path, you get to the center and you turn around and there’s just that same way back out. No way to get lost,” Father Tom Unrath said.

After her passing, a celebration of life was held in the Chapel, with alumni coming to pay their respects. Her family and loved ones worked to fund this project to commemorate Nicole Unrath’s memory.

“It’s a memorial for Nicole

Unrath. It was a particular way that she expressed her own spirituality. She was an outgoing person, she was known for reminding people that God loved them. [The Labyrinth] is an invitation into that practice,” Pastor Jim Westzsein said.

With many distractions surrounding our daily lives, it benefits us to retreat into the quietness of inner stillness by means of prayer.

“If I have any encouragement in this noisy, cacophony of [business] and self-absorption, enter the Labyrinth, submit yourself to God, let God speak to you and be at peace,” Cunningham said. “It’s almost sacramental. If you’re doing it purposefully, you have a union with God that is so special.”

Through her mission to spread the Gospel and embody love through how she conducted herself, Nicole Unrath continues to show the Valparaiso community how to love in an increasingly divided age.

“I have been able to change this corner of the world in small ways and have grown through my Valpo experience,” the late Nicole Unrath wrote for a reflection assignment.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the Resurrection Labyrinth’s dedication. A service will be held on October 8 during Morning Prayer, which will commence at 10:10 a.m. in the Gloria Christi Chapel. The service will end at the Labyrinth in order to honor Nicole Unrath’s memory and express gratitude for the memorial.

“She had [the] ability to really see people for who they were, brokenness and all, and loved them just the same,” friend and former housemate Heather (née Miller) Fleming said.

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Photos Provided

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It's imperative to understand the context of a symbol when it is used. To become acquainted with the stories that fuel the life of a symbol gives its meaning even more significance.

"I think you can see [the Labyrinth] and go, 'It's aesthetically pleasing and it's a good metaphor.' But I think

it's important to realize there's this huge community of people, who when they first see that symbol, their first reaction is 'I miss Nicole,' Pudwell said.

During Lent, Cunningham rented a temporary canvas labyrinth that filled a third of the Chapel. The pews were moved to create room and the worship space was reworked to fit the labyrinth.

"Nicole and I were looking out

on that space [where the labyrinth currently stands] and she said, 'Pastor Cunningham, wouldn't it be great if we could have a labyrinth out there?'" Cunningham said.

Cunningham mentioned this conversation to Nicole Unrath's parents when they discussed what type of memorial would best suit her.

"I think we honor Nicole Unrath best by telling her story and not just letting that be a

logo or a picture, but actually using it for the tool it was meant to be. It was a gift to the community, meant to be used for actually walking and for prayerful reflection. I think we're doing that gift the most justice if we actually use it for that and actually talk about the story of how it came to be," Pudwell said.

Nicole Unrath's zeal for the Lord and for loving others has continued to live on in the hearts

of those who knew her and those who hear her legacy. The impact of her example has echoed through time, showing us how we can love and foster community right where we are. Cunningham shared an additional phrase attributed to Nicole Unrath, which he has used in countless sermons that reminds us of her childlike faith: "God loves you so much and He will never, ever let you go," Nicole Unrath said.