All One
thirty years after the worst sports disaster in history, the community celebrates the program's resurrection

Many of you know the facts. On Saturday, November 14, 1970 at 7:35 p.m. a chartered Southern Airways DC-9 crashed into a foggy hillside just west of Tri-State Airport. All 75 passengers – including members of Marshall’s football team, its coaches and athletic staff – were killed instantly. Also on board were the team’s biggest boosters: doctors, business leaders, legislators, husbands and wives who traveled to games together.

Causes of the crash have never been precisely determined, but pilot error and equipment malfunction remain strong possibilities.

In the past 30 years, we have read these words over and over again, and quite a few of us know them by heart. So why do we keep reading the story? Why do we blink away misty emotions every November? Why do we cheer “We Are . . .” with a deep, inner conviction that is almost out of place in a football stadium?

The answer lies in the simple fact that the crash altered our history forever. In one tragic instant on a rainy Saturday night, it changed lives, it transformed Marshall, and most of all, it determined who we are and what we have become.

by deborah novak & john witek
This was a gift to the university from the community. That evening, an inspired Marshall team took the field to defeat rival Miami of Ohio 51-31. Before the game, the team also had a private showing of the feature-length documentary, *Ashes To Glory*. On Sunday evening, *Ashes* had its world theatrical premiere at the Keith-Albee Theater in downtown Huntington. Those who attended described it as “a magical evening” or “a night to remember.”

It began with a reception at the City National Bank on the corner of 4th Avenue and 10th Street. In attendance were participants in the program, along with 1970 team family members and players on the 1971 “Young Thundering Herd.”

At 7 p.m., the program began. Using a wide-screen video projection system sent in from Chicago, *Ashes*, which was shot on videotape, was blown up to movie screen size.

During the presentation, which consistently evoked memories, many tears were shed. But there was also laughter and cheers when, as Jack Lengyel said, the Herd “rose like a phoenix from the ashes.”

The cheers continued through the credits when one fan in the balcony started the famous “We Are . . . Marshall” cheer that rang through the theatre for all of heaven to hear.

On November 14th, the student government held the annual memorial service on the plaza in front of the student center. Among those who spoke in a moving service were student body president Bill Walker, University President Dr. Dan Angel and The Honorable Cecil H. Underwood.

In addition, to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the crash, the name of 20th Street, between 3rd Avenue and Norway, has now been changed to “Marshall Memorial Boulevard.” State historical markers have been placed at both ends reminding the community that “this boulevard, named in
The Young Herd’s courage was also the foundation for Marshall football’s greatness to come. Though victories were few and far between in the 1970s, Marshall had its first winning season in 20 years in 1984. And the team kept climbing to the top of the Division I-AA bracket and then to a bowl-winning I-A team ranked 10th in the nation in 1999. The long road back culminated when Marshall won more football games in the 1990s than any other college team in the nation.

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Thirty years after college football’s darkest hour, the events of 1970 were lovingly commemorated this past November by the community of faculty, students, alumni and friends that constitutes the Marshall family.

On the evening of November 11th, a memorial bronze was unveiled on the west side of Marshall stadium. Utilizing contributions from the community, artist Burl Jones created the magnificent sculpture entitled “We Are Marshall.” It was shipped to Huntington from a foundry in Big Timber, Montana and mounted on a brick wall built by local union craftsmen who volunteered their time. As fans gathered to hear dedication speeches from John Krieger, Jr., Robert Hardwick, Keith Morehouse and Coach Bobby Pruett, cheers erupted when the 5000 pound sculpture was unveiled. This was a gift to the universi-
The tragedy brought the Marshall community closer than it had ever been before. Defensive back Nate Ruffin, who was not aboard the ill-fated DC-9 because of an injury, spoke for the entire school when he said of that night, “All the barriers were down. No race seemed to exist. No male or female seemed to exist. It was just all one heart, crying for what had happened.”

In the aftermath, the school pulled together like pioneers circling the wagons. While many said that the Herd’s football program would never rise from the ashes, Marshall made a courageous decision to field a team in honor of those who perished. Joe McMullen was appointed athletic director and 35-year-old Jack Lengyel from Wooster, Ohio, would take a program in tatters and turn it into a football miracle.

The 1971 Young Thundering Herd was a team that was as green as their Marshall jerseys. Ninety percent of the players had never played varsity ball. Many were frightened, homesick youngsters on the roster because the NCAA permitted Marshall to play freshmen at the varsity level for the first time. But the people of Huntington believed in them and, under Lengyel’s patient guidance, gradually they began to believe in themselves. Their first home game took place at Fairfield Stadium on September 25, 1971.

Their opponent was Xavier University of Ohio, an established team of bigger, more experienced players. Marshall took a giant leap on the long road back when tailback Terry Gardner carried quarterback Reggie Oliver’s bootleg screen pass into the endzone.

This unbelievable win on the last play of the game was like a Hollywood movie – only you couldn’t write a better script. As sportswriter Ernie Salvatore commented, “I think that was the greatest football victory. Period.”
the honor of these fallen members of the university family, leads visitors from the heart of the Marshall University campus to the Spring Hill Cemetery."

For many of us, it is the legacy of those 75 people that has kept us moving forward, reaching for a bigger and better Marshall, and one that we can all be proud of. We believe this is what they would want us to do.

So we keep reading the story and telling the story because we will never forget those aboard the Marshall plane. They have drawn us together so that we have a deep, tenacious love for this school. They have made us all one heart.

John Witek and Deborah Novak, owners of Witek & Novak, Inc. in Huntington, produce documentaries for public television. Their latest project was Ashes to Glory. Ms. Novak earned her Bachelor of Fine Arts in music from Marshall University in 1999.