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News

Standing U.Va. Strong: Will Beta Bridge take on a new tradition?

The memorial for November's shooting marks the longest period of time a single message has dominated the bridge



For now, those walking across the orange and blue Beta Bridge will be reminded of the ever-evolving process of healing from tragedy. **Photo by [Merrill Hart](#) | The Cavalier Daily**

By [Merrill Hart](#)

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Three hand-painted stars climb a column of the University's Beta Bridge above the large "Forever in our hearts" lettering emblazoned across the orange wall. Nestled in the heart of the University's student community, the bridge's mural still features hundreds of scrawled Sharpie messages like "Rest in power," "You will never be forgotten" and "U.Va. Strong" in remembrance of the three students who died in a Nov. 13 shooting.

Community members [converged](#) on Beta Bridge in the days following the shooting to honor the lives of students and football players Devin Chandler, D'Sean Perry and Lavel Davis Jr. who died in the November [shooting](#) after a school field. The painted memorial marks the longest period of time a single message has dominated the bridge — 276 days at time of publication.

Although the bridge is not University property, students have [painted its walls](#) since the 1970's as a space for creative expression and public announcements. Traditionally, students leave fresh messages on the bridge by painting over old announcements — the face of Beta Bridge [evolves daily](#) with each new layer of paint. When a 4 inch slab [peeled off](#) in 2020, it weighed more than 500 pounds.

Gearing up for a new semester, however, the orange and blue lettering from November still stands strong.

The power of the bridge's current message raises questions over the future of the University's Beta Bridge tradition. Is there value in returning the bridge to its original design as a message board? Or will the community protect the "U.Va. Strong" layer as a permanent memorial to the three lives lost?

The previous record for Beta's longest singular [message](#) — 53 days — belonged to the "[Hoos for Hokies](#)" painting in memory of the 2007 mass [shooting](#) at Virginia Tech. Unlike the U.Va. Strong memorial, however, the Hokie message only took up one side of the bridge.

In her 2019 [article](#) on Beta Bridge as a forum of public expression, Kate Granuth, third-year Law student and Cavalier Daily alumna, writes that the art was eventually painted over by Tech students in the area. The new message read "Thanks Hoos <3 the Hokies. See you Nov. 24!" referring to the upcoming rivalry football game.

Looking back at her research, Granuth noted that Beta Bridge has long offered a unique space for the community to share grief.

"There's definitely a sense that there's a preservation of things that symbolize something greater than the tradition [of painting over messages], for community and healing," Granuth said.

Since November, students have added new messages in Sharpie for the victims — a process Granuth says reflects the complicated journey of healing.

While the painting has gradually evolved through the addition of these small messages, about a fourth of the bridge was completely painted over in July by an unknown artist. The bright painting features flowers, handprints, and the words "Grow, love, hope."

In anticipation of the "[temporary nature](#)" of Beta Bridge, a team from the University's Office of Communications created a [photo book](#) to preserve the community's outpouring of emotion after the shooting. Copies of the book released in February were shared with families and friends of the football players, with a digital version [available online](#).

Senior Photographer Sanjay Suchak said the team ensured that each individual message remained legible.

"It was a means to capture the outpouring of support and share it with the families," Suchak said in a written statement to The Cavalier Daily. "That said, Beta Bridge has always been an ephemeral part of the U.Va. experience — it's public property outside of the control of any institution and has been painted over hundreds of times."

Now that the bridge's messages have been preserved in pages, some students have [advocated](#) a community effort that would officially return Beta Bridge to its status as a public forum.

According to Julie Caruccio, assistant vice president for research on student experience, a student reached out to administrators last year to coordinate these plans. While a working group is planning for a permanent memorial elsewhere, Caruccio said Beta Bridge is not on University property and therefore not under their control.

"The [working] group agreed that, with regard to the bridge, the University should treat the decision about when and how to repaint the bridge the way we always do — it's not our decision, and it's appropriate for students or community members to decide when and how to paint a new message as they see fit," Caruccio said in a written statement to The Cavalier Daily.

Caruccio encouraged the student to speak with Student Council leaders since students will ultimately decide what happens.

Tichara Robertson, Student Council president and fourth-year College student, and Holly Sims, vice president for administration and Public Policy master student, said that while the student has not approached their organization, they are not opposed to working on a similar project in due time.

“We would prefer for there to be more input from the victim's families and the football team before moving forward with any permanent memorial project or deciding how to move forward with the bridge,” Robertson said in a written statement to The Cavalier Daily.

One option may be designating a section of the bridge to U.Va. strong messaging and reopening the remainder for general use. Last year, a small painting reading “Ukraine fights against genocide” in support of the ongoing [conflict](#) in Ukraine lasted for at least 153 days, per the community-run [Beta Bridge instagram](#).

Granuth wondered if the football team would come together to repaint the bridge similar to how Tech students thanked the community for their message. She added, however, that the depth of the tragedy complicates the situation.

“It’s hard, because not only is this a memorial that is on a touchstone part of Grounds, but it's so close to where [the shooting] actually happened that to an extent, it's like an actual memorial there,” Granuth said.

While the future of the messages perhaps remains uncertain, the impact of the U.Va. Strong memorial will outlast new layers of paint. And if the painting remains, continuing its record-breaking streak? For over 50 years, the ever changing face of Beta Bridge has proved that evolution defines even the University’s most time-honored traditions.