

## Larry Igo and Family Killed in 1997 Jarrell, Texas Tornado:

Note: Larry taught at John H. Reagan High School as an auto mechanic shop teacher.

# Family lost in tornado left gift to Texas town

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JARRELL, Texas — As a tornado of historic size barreled south toward him, Larry Igo raced home from his vintage car restoration shop May 27, 1997, twin sons John and Paul in tow. His wife, Joan, and daughter, Audrey, rushed home from school.

The school and shop, which had been in the tornado's track, survived. The storm turned southwest, grinding up the Igos' neighborhood with winds above 261 mph and leaving nothing in its wake. The deadly tornado killed 27 people. The Igo family was wiped from the face of the earth.

Or were they?

A decade later, the legacy of the modest, churchgoing Igo family is still emerging in this small Texas town of 2,000 or so people. It's seen in the land they owned, the car Larry never finished, the trees Joan helped plant along Jarrell's main drag. It's heard in the psalms sung at their Baptist church and felt in the friendships formed by their passing.

Perhaps most significantly, it's embodied by the people whose lives were touched by the Igos — by Joan's teaching innovations, Larry's devotion to detail, Audrey's musical talents, the twins' exuberance.

Their pastor, Max Johnson, puts it this way: "God can take all the broken pieces and put it back together in a way that's good."

This week, the crack of baseballs hitting bats could be heard on land the Igos once owned.

Most of the ballplayers were too young to recall the F5 tornado that made almost 50 homes disappear. The girls playing T-ball in pink helmets and the boys playing machine-pitch baseball paid no attention to the plaque commemorating the donation by the families of Larry and Joan Igo. They didn't count the 27 trees in a semicircle at Jarrell Memorial Park's entrance or the two storm cellars that Larry's dad, Louis, insisted be part of the project.

That doesn't matter to Louis Igo, who lost all heirs to his family name that day 10 years ago, and his first wife, June, a year later after 50 years of marriage. "It's been a real benefit to the community," he says of the 7 acres, which include a playground and community building. "You may have 300 people that come out here for a get-together."

The two modern ball fields are a vast improvement over the smaller field at the local high school, where plaques memorialize the 12 students and one teacher killed in the tornado. On the top row: Joan Igo, forever 45, and her children Audrey, 17, and twins John and Paul, 15.

"It's a very humble donation to the community left by a very beloved family," says Vernon Fuller, who umpired the girls' game. "These kids have a real ballpark."

Joshua Goodnight, whose son smashed a home run for the visiting team from Salado on Tuesday night, calls the donation "remarkable."

"Baseball is America's pastime," he says. "What better thing to do with the land. Kids will enjoy this for years to come."

### **'It will always be Larry's car'**

When he entered his son's shop after the tornado, says Louis Igo, who turned 80 Thursday, "I could see his fingerprints on everything."

Some would say those fingerprints are still there.

At 46, Larry Igo was a whiz at refinishing old cars and a source of spare auto parts. He spent hours on the phone advising even non-paying customers. His own 1955 Chevy Bel Air languished.

To aficionados of vintage automobiles, there's something almost religious about a '55 Chevy.

That's why a bunch of Larry's friends got together years after his death and told Louis Igo they wanted to finish the two-door hardtop Larry was working on.

Troy Clawson, for whom Larry was part father figure, part friend, led the effort. It took the talents of many people, including a Snap-on tools dealer and Larry's dad, who once taught auto mechanics, to finish the job in 2003. When the last problem involving head gaskets was solved, the car "fired up the first crank of the switch, and it's been running ever since," Clawson says.

Today the coral-colored masterpiece wins "Best of Show" ribbons with Louis behind the wheel. More important on a human level, all the guys involved in the restoration, ranging from their 30s to their 80s, have become close friends.

Clawson hopes the car gets passed down to other relatives of Larry or Joan. But he says, "No matter who has the keys in their pocket, it will always be Larry's car."

Larry's love for vintage cars rubbed off on Clawson. After the tornado destroyed his house, he had several issues on his plate, including a baby on the way. The first thing he did was buy a '55 Chevy from a friend, knowing that Larry had worked on it. "Larry had some handwork in it," Clawson recalls. "I needed that connection. I still have a piece of Larry with me."

### **'Pioneering' work with children**

Larry's legacy is in his cars. Joan's is in her children — those she taught at Jarrell Elementary School.

Foremost among them is Jennifer Syme-Van Fossen. She was the first student with autism in Jarrell, which is about 40 miles north of Austin.

Joan Igo, a special education teacher, created the curriculum from scratch.

"Joan did a lot of pioneering work with this girl," says David Harp, principal of Jarrell Elementary School. "No one around here at that time had had an autistic child who was that severe. She had to kind of make it up as she went."

Not everything worked, as Jennifer's mother, Diann, will attest.

Igo taught the girl how to read using phonics, which was common at the time. Years later, teachers would have to correct Jennifer's spelling.

"She helped start the special education regimen at the school. Now there's a whole department," Diann Syme-Van Fossen says.

Jennifer graduated from Jarrell High School last year and helps her mother run a ranch outside town.

The teachers Igo worked with also learned from her example.

"I have patience, but she really had patience," says Janine Nemecek, the district's other special education teacher at the time. "Sometimes I think of her to give myself more patience. She was a good role model."

These days, friends and neighbors remember Joan Igo when they drive from the bank to the school — and not just for her teaching. She worked with a civic group that planted trees along the road to improve the town's appearance.

Every winter, as she wished, the area is decorated for the holidays.

### **Singing all four verses**

The land, the cars, the children, the trees — that's not all the Igos left for Jarrell to remember them.

Mike Adams, who once dated Audrey, was smitten by the emergency response to the tornado and became a fireman in nearby Temple. John Leslie, who was best friends with Paul and John, went on to become a youth minister. Allison Cruse, who was on the drill team with Audrey, works for a non-profit group in Colorado that serves the poor and migrant farmers.

Their parents can't make a direct connection, but they see compassion in their children's choices — the same compassion the Igos had for their neighbors, and that Jarrell returned in the days, weeks, months and years after the tornado. Louis' second wife, Mildred, says someone still anonymously leaves flowers on Audrey's grave.

John Leslie "lost his two best friends in one day. That had a significant impact on the way he looked at things," says his father, Robert. Kathy Cruse, Allison's mom, says, "You are the sum total of all your experiences."

At church Sunday, Louis Igo will bring flowers, as he always does on these sad anniversaries. Max Johnson will eulogize the dead but won't try to make sense of the disaster. To those who want answers, "I try to explain to them that 'why' will probably not be answered, at least in this life."

Then the congregation will sing. When Joan played piano and Larry led the choir, the Baptists used to sing the first, second and fourth verses of hymns to save time. Larry didn't like skipping the third.

Sunday, they will sing the third verse — as they usually do now.

"Larry always wanted to sing all four of them," says Buck Jones, Jarrell's ex-postmaster. "Very seldom do they skip the third verse now."

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## Small Texas Town Still Remembers, Honors, Family Killed by F5 Tornado in 1997

***"God can take all the broken pieces and put it back together in a way that's good."***

Richard Wolf/TN (May 28th, 2007)

On May 27, 1997, Larry Igo, his wife Audrey, their twin sons John and Paul, and daughter Audrey, were among the 27 people killed in a devastating F5 tornado that ripped through Jarrell, Texas.

According to a *USA Today* report, "a decade later, the legacy of the modest, churchgoing Igo family is still emerging...It's seen in the land they owned, the car Larry never finished, the trees Joan helped plant along Jarrell's main drag. It's heard in the psalms sung at their Baptist church and felt in the friendships formed by their passing. Perhaps most significantly, it's embodied by the people whose lives were touched by the Igos—by Joan's teaching innovations, Larry's devotion to detail, Audrey's musical talents, the twins' exuberance." (Photo: *USA Today*)

Their pastor, Max Johnson, puts it this way: "God can take all the broken pieces and put it back together in a way that's good." This week, the crack of baseballs hitting bats could be heard on land the Igos once owned.

Of the 7 acres once owned by Larry and Audrey Igo and now housing a playground, ballfields and community building, patriarch Luis Igo (who lost all the heirs to his family name in the tornado) says: "It's been a real benefit to the community. You may have 300 people that come out here for a get-together."

Reporter Richard Wolf noted that Jarrell resident Mike Adams, who once dated Audrey, "was smitten by the emergency response to the tornado and became a fireman in nearby Temple. John Leslie, who was best friends with Paul and John, went on to become a youth minister. Allison Cruse, who was on the drill team with Audrey, works for a non-profit group in Colorado that serves the poor and migrant farmers."

**Source:** [USA Today](#)