

THE  
BENEFITS, CHALLENGES, & CAUTIONS  
OF  
MEMORIALIZING TRAGEDY

MAHAUGANEE D. SHAW, PH.D.

@MoeDShaw | #CampusMemorials

THE  
BENEFITS  
OF MEMORIALIZATION

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THE  
CHALLENGE  
OF MEMORIALIZATION

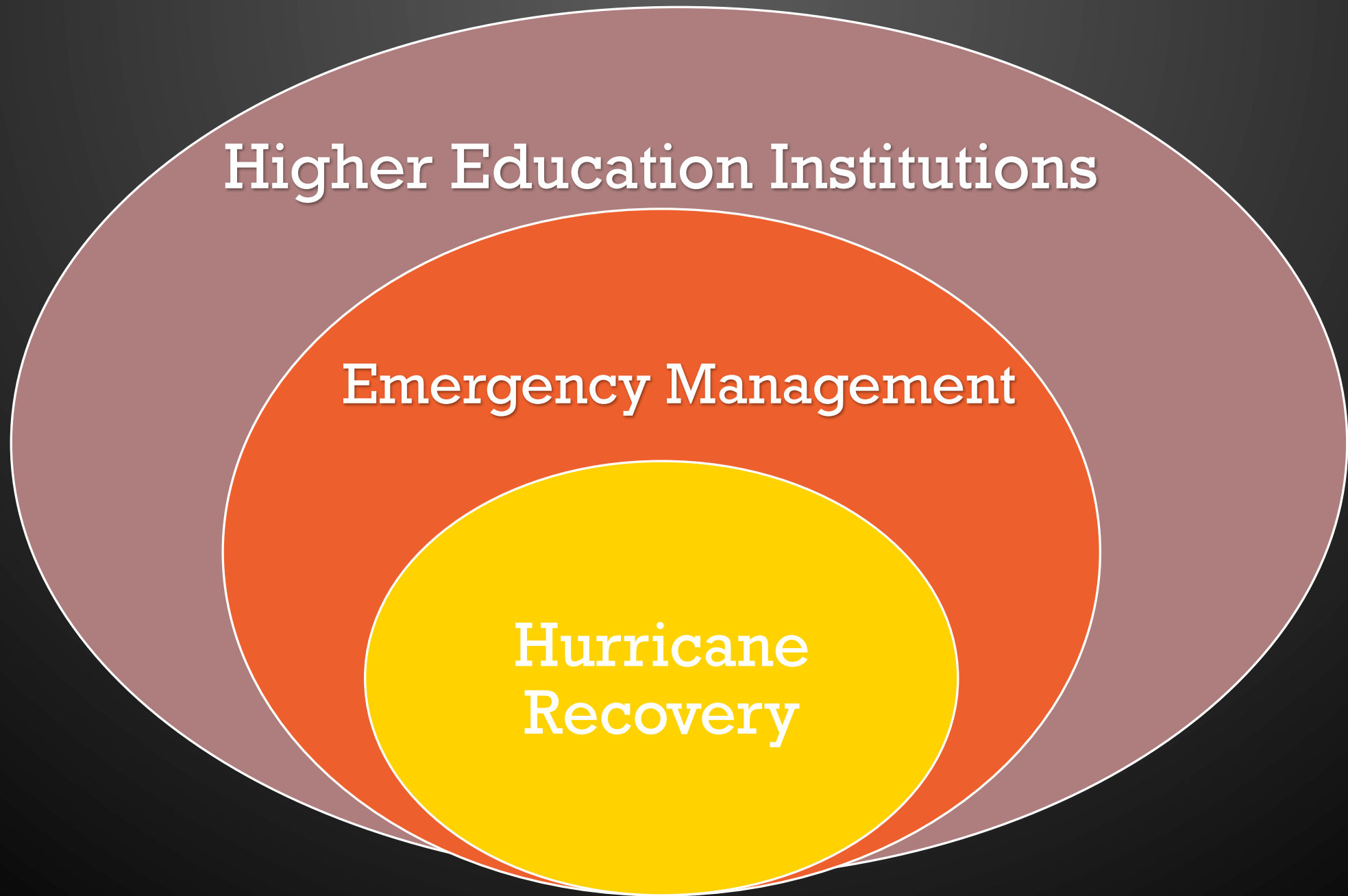
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THE  
CAUTIONS  
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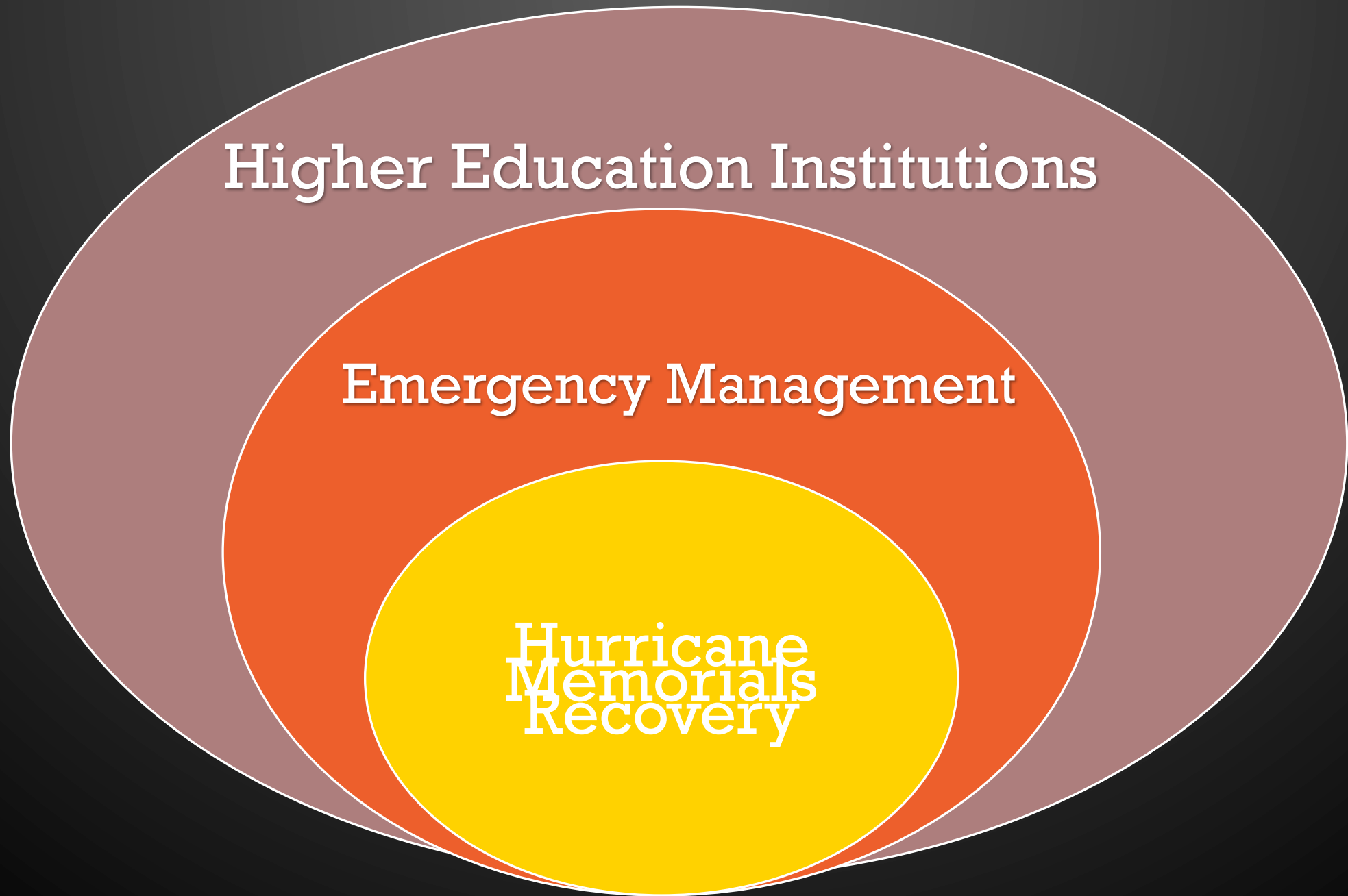
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“There are reasons, after a campus crisis, that institutions do not want to remember what happened”

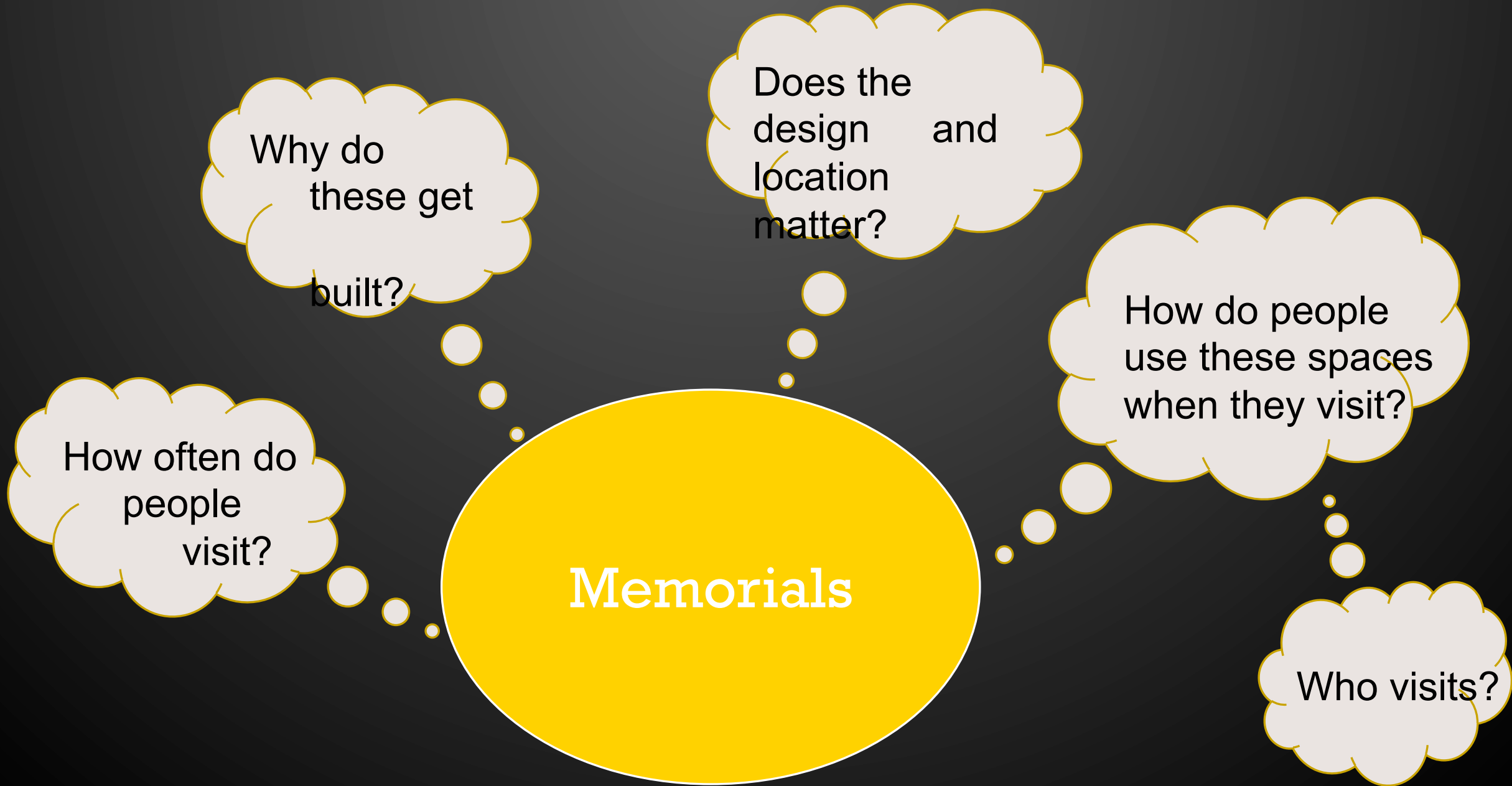


Higher Education Institutions

Emergency Management

Hurricane  
Memorials  
Recovery

“There are reasons, after a campus crisis, that institutions do not want to remember what happened”



“There are reasons, after a campus crisis, that institutions do not want to remember what happened”

# STUDYING CAMPUS MEMORIALS



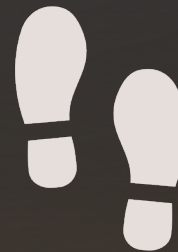
Structures (& their events)  
commemorating an  
emergency



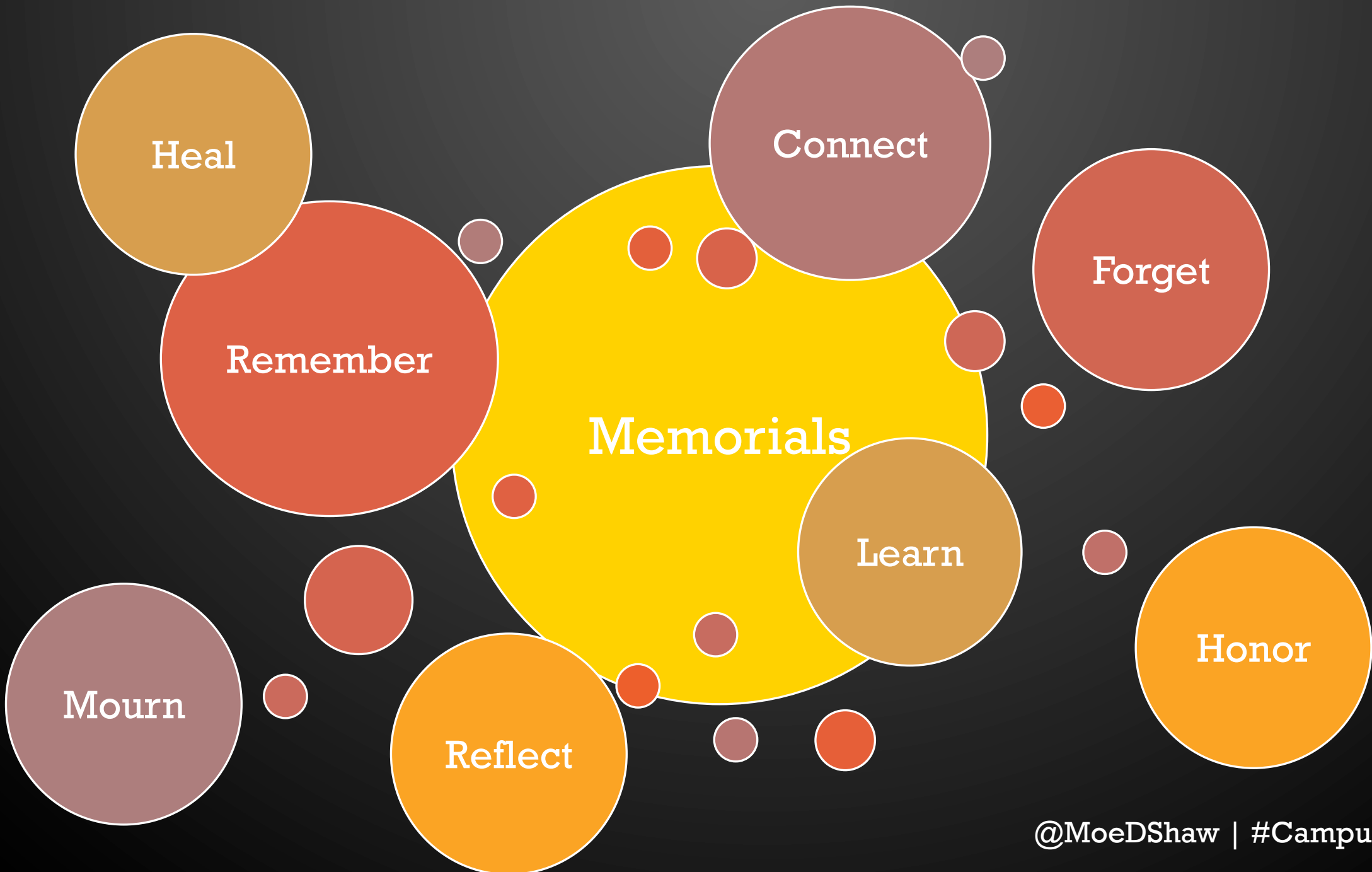
27 existing memorials on  
23 U.S. college campuses



3 in the planning phase



Visited 4 existing memorials  
on 4 campuses



# OVERARCHING THEMES

- Presence, continuation, and upkeep of memorials
  - » impact to current and future community members
- Design and placement of memorials
  - » impact to the physical and constructed environment
- Audience Interests



## FOCUSING EVENT

### Annual Commemoration of Marshall University's 1970 Air Tragedy

- All 75 people onboard perished
- Plane carrying football players, staff, team supporters, & flight crew

## PURPOSE

Provide insight and lessons for communities that have experienced loss of life more recently

- The influence, outcomes, and benefits of memorialization

Memorial Marker  
Crash Site



Memorial Fountain  
Marshall University Campus



Memorial Centotaph  
Spring Hill Cemetery

THE  
**BENEFITS**  
OF MEMORIALIZATION

# PROVIDES A DESIGNATED GATHERING PLACE FOR FAMILY AND LARGER COMMUNITY

- People travel far and wide to be present on the anniversary
  - Some people treat it as a pilgrimage
  - Family treat it as a reunion
- Throughout the year, the memorial is a central space for community members

“I work here [at Marshall University] and so obviously you eat lunch there [at the memorial fountain]. And by the way, you know? One if you’re on Marshall’s campus, you can’t help hardly but to walk by the fountain. I mean if you’re going anywhere on campus, it’s right in the center. It’s really something that you don’t...it’s just something that you don’t get away from in Huntington.”

## PROMOTING CONNECTION & COLLECTIVE PROCESSING

- Tragedy is a common experience
- Memorials allow people to
  - Meet strangers | Commemorate together | Hear/learn a common narrative

“ It [the plane crash] made the community band together, as well as supporting and surrounding the students at Marshall University, because those students had some kind of connection to somebody on that plane crash, but also those community members had somebody that was connected on that plane.

“ Freshman year, being so far away from home [New Jersey], I was thinking about transferring back or transferring somewhere else. And I went to the Fountain Ceremony, I went with some friends and everything, and I just felt that community come together.

## SUPPORTING GRIEVING FAMILIES

- Annual gathering is a recognition that the grief does not fade
- People close to the deceased sometimes need the sense of community and the designated space to grieve openly

“

It's always a good time to go back. Even this time, there were people there that has never attended a memorial since the crash, and I met some of those people this time. You know, who just couldn't, you know for whatever reason, build up the courage to go back for a service. So, you know I was glad to be able to meet them.

”

## PARTICIPATION IS MEANINGFUL AND CATHARTIC FOR MOST

“It is tremendously meaningful when I look around at the crowd....It's impressive and touching to me how many 18 to 25 year olds I see who have taken the time to come and attend and who are paying attention.

“I always tell students in my freshman UNI class the one thing that I really want them to do is come to the Fountain Ceremony, and they will feel the importance of being a Marshall student. You *feel it* on the day. It grabs you. It takes hold of you.

## OFFERING A SYMBOL OF COMMUNITY HONOR AND PRESTIGE

- A physical memorial can become sacred space within a community
  - Messaging (written and verbal) matters
- The narrative around a tragedy can become a point of pride
  - Themes: resilience, recovery, community, bravery, etc.

“

I've never seen it [the fountain] disrespected, ever. That's coveted ground at Marshall. People don't go in the water. People don't throw coins in the water. People sit on the side and do homework, and that's the only physical interaction I've ever seen with that fountain. It's like when you go to the graveyard, you don't mess with the stones.

”



THE  
**CHALLENGE**  
OF MEMORIALIZATION

## EDUCATING NEWCOMERS

- People (unconnected to the community) may travel to participate
- New people come into the community
- Passersby may stop to visit the location

“

Going to the memorial made it that much realer, and actually made it realer for me hearing the names and hearing what happened and having people recall what was happening at that time makes it far more realer and makes it feel like I was there.

”

# SUSTAINING MEMORIES

## BUILDING A NARRATIVE

- Competing narratives often exist
- Memorials offer (some) control of the narrative
- Contributing to the narrative will encourage people to travel

“

We owe it to the football players and the coaches and the people who died on the plane to keep that memory alive. Because it is [a memory] not only one of sadness but a rising from the ashes, that we are not going to roll over and die, that we are a community that is viable.

”

# PLACEMENT MATTERS

- Placement options:

At the Site of the Incident | Central to the Community | Outskirts of the Community

- » these options can overlap

- » many communities do more than one

- Considerations

- Accessibility to those most impacted, community members, and general public

- Flow of foot traffic

- Positioning of sad/solemn spaces

THE  
**CAUTIONS**  
OF MEMORIALIZATION



# SOME PEOPLE STRUGGLE TO SEPARATE THE PAIN OF LOSS FROM THE ACT OF REMEMBRANCE

- If healing is stalled, people can be re-injured by remembrance
- Reinjury is a real consequence of memorialization

“

I really have a hard time going to [the annual memorial ceremony]. I've been to one, and it was the second one. I couldn't go to the first one, I just couldn't. And then the second one they had, I went to and I wish I hadn't gone to that. I don't think we should forget what happened, but I'm not sure in my opinion that it's anything I need to commemorate each year, that loss.

”

# WHEN MEMORIALIZING TRAGEDY, REMEMBER...



## Benefits

- Designated gathering space
- Promotes connection & processing
- Supports grieving people
- Provides community symbol

## Challenges

- Educating newcomers
- Building a narrative
- Determining placement

## Caution

- Reinjuring those deeply impacted

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# Q&A / DISCUSSION

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