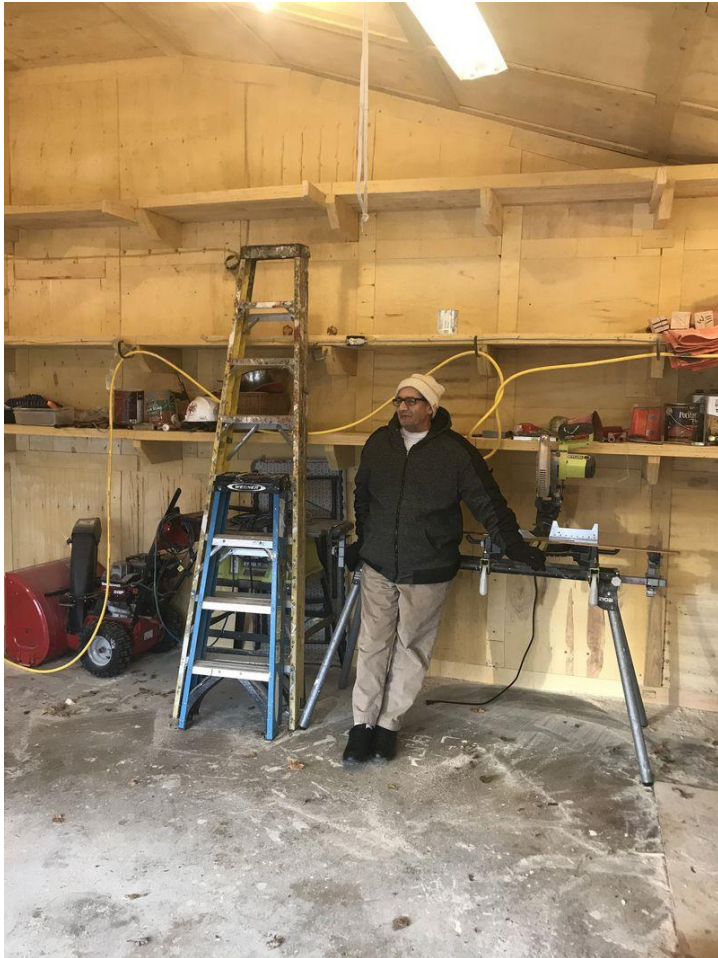


# Column: Aurora's retired 'Cross Man' reflects on the toll his ministry took on him

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Greg Zanis stands inside his workshop in Aurora that, until recently, was filled with piles of wood and the crosses he made that were delivered all across this country to the sites of mass shootings. (Denise Crosby / The Beacon-News)

When I heard the news while on vacation that Greg Zanis was retiring as this nation's "Cross Man," I was not at all surprised.

Because I've written so many columns over the past 20 years about the Aurora carpenter who became nationally known for creating and transporting memorial crosses to the sites of mass

shootings, I was well aware of the toll this ministry was putting on his body, his finances and his family life.

And of course on his mental health.

Sue, his wife of 45 years who has supported him unconditionally in this incredibly compelling ministry, quickly nods her head in agreement when I suggest PTSD. After all, how can someone possibly haul some 27,000 crosses across the country in the back of a pickup truck without personally feeling the weight of that heavy load?

No matter how buoyed he would get by the responses those crosses created, the burden of facing and trying to bring comfort to so many grieving loved ones had become increasingly apparent in Zanis' face, in his voice and in his demeanor.

Especially after the overdose death of his daughter Maria a couple years ago. Especially after last year's record number of mass shootings, including here in his hometown in February, then half a year later, back-to-back massacres in El Paso, Texas, and Dayton, Ohio.

Seriously, how many crosses can one man bear before falling under their weight?

After passing out from sheer physical and emotional exhaustion in El Paso, where 22 people were killed, Zanis decided that this journey that started in Aurora in 1996 after the murder of a 6-year-old child and took on a national spotlight a few years later at Columbine High School in Colorado had to come to an end.

Still, after resting for a short time from that Texas blackout, caused by heat, fatigue and emotional exhaustion, Zanis got back in his truck and headed to Dayton, to erect another nine crosses for victims there. And in December, while fighting the flu, he tried to make another trip to Florida following the shooting at the Pensacola naval base — only this time he turned around and came back.

A couple weeks later, the Cross Man, who has traveled over 800,000 miles on this journey, officially announced his retirement, along with intentions to turn the cross ministry over to the Chicago-based Lutheran Church Charities, which became familiar with Zanis at the site of these tragedies when they would take comfort dogs to help victims and their families.

From the time I first met him shortly after Columbine in 1999, Zanis has been driven in ways most normal folks, including myself, could never fully understand. Even Sue admits to years of frustration, doubt and at times anger, as she saw their family struggle, debt mount and her husband's health deteriorate.

But when I met with Zanis last week I saw a different man. He smiles more, for one thing. His eyes held more vibrancy. And he's lost 23 pounds, which, according to Sue, occurred after her nephew survived an overdose in November and brought to the surface so many of Greg's unresolved feelings about their daughter's death from heroin.

Two weeks after he lost Maria, you might recall, Zanis headed to Parkland, Florida, where he attempted to deal with his pain by throwing himself into the grief of so many other parents. Now, he told me – smiling while he did so – he’s going to therapy to deal with this trauma the right way.

“I want to be able to clean my mind out,” Zanis insisted, “to think more purely again and not so much about death.”

“There was just so much negative before,” his wife added. “He was fighting against hope ... going off to death and destruction and so much sadness.”

By giving up his Crosses for Losses ministry, he added, “I can start to do more normal things again,” like attend a holiday concert with Sue, spend time with their two young grandchildren and go to church every Sunday instead of being on the road to the latest American tragedy. Maybe, when finances stabilize, even finish that family vacation that was interrupted when two students with guns walked into Columbine High School.

And he’s especially excited about getting back to a passion he gave up two decades ago, restoring the 1927 Cadillac limo that, according to documentation, belonged to Al Capone’s son and reportedly was at the back door of the building where the St. Valentine’s Day Massacre took place.

Now this iconic gangster vehicle, with its bulletproof upgrades and secret panels for weapons, sits in the same garage where he once made thousands of crosses, many of which have appeared hundreds of times on television or in newspapers and magazines.

As Zanis has so often told me about what he’s been through these past 20 years, “it’s complicated.”

And now he yearns for life to be simpler.

Like the carpenter who toiled for countless hours inside these walls, the garage too, has gone through a metamorphosis. I had never before seen this workshop when it was not jammed with piles of fresh wood or dozens of crosses, either in various stages of development or the duplicates and/or originals of those planted in places like Columbine, Sandy Hook and Parkland.

Places that have become synonymous with a scourge that has cast so much darkness across our great nation.

Now Zanis’ Aurora workshop holds only a few tools, eerily empty and recently painted a bright shade of yellow to mimic the sunshine he’s started to allow into his world.

“I am going to be a different person,” he told me. “I will have more joy in my life.”

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