

The Cross Guy

Greg Zanis has scattered his handiwork across the country, from rural routes to Columbine to the Lincoln Park porch collapse. Why is he so consumed with the deaths of strangers?

By Tori Marlan

Chicago Reader

January 8, 2004

Greg Zanis is driving along a winding country road in Kane County, searching for the spot where a motorcyclist was struck and killed. The end of an eight-foot wooden cross, painted white, hangs off the back of his pickup truck, above a bumper sticker that says, "Life Is Short. Pray Hard."

Earlier in the day Zanis, a self-employed Aurora carpenter and general contractor, had written the motorcyclist's name, Greg Taylor, on the cross in black marker. He'd also affixed a tiny stuffed bear to it, along with a blue "remembrance" pin shaped like an AIDS ribbon.

Zanis didn't know Taylor. But when he hears about a sudden, violent death he springs into action, erecting a cross where the death occurred. He learns about deaths from various sources: newspapers, police officers, acquaintances, people who knew the victims.

The information he has today is sketchy: a car swerved to avoid hitting a bicyclist and slammed into Taylor instead. It happened on Jericho Road, somewhere near the county line and Bertram Road. If he can't figure out where, he tells me, he'll simply "knock on some doors."

The south-suburban landscape is dotted with his crosses. Zanis says the roads out here can be treacherous because of their soft shoulders: when people run onto them they often overcompensate, reacting with a quick jerk of the wheel. Do that, he says, and "you make your car roll," even if you're doing only 35.

People often overcompensate. They also come around corners too hard, drive too fast, fall asleep at the wheel, and underestimate how much liquor they've consumed. The victims' families and friends "always go back to the crash site, walk around, try to analyze it," Zanis says. "If they see a cross, more than likely they'll go and buy some flowers and come right back." Once the crosses have become shrines--after flowers and messages and trinkets have been left--he often organizes a prayer vigil.

Zanis also puts up crosses to mark deadly domestic disputes, drownings, gang shootings, and the occasional small airplane crash. As if there weren't enough fatalities in the south suburbs, he's memorialized the Lincoln Park porch collapse, the E2 nightclub stampede, the Cook County administration building fire, the Columbine shootings, and the Kennedy plane crash. Last April he drove to a tiny town 100 miles west of Chicago to give a couple a cross; stapled to it was a blown-up newspaper photo of their son, who'd been killed the day before in a grenade attack in Iraq. Zanis doesn't mind a long trip. "In a heartbeat," he says, "the phone rings and I could be heading out of state."

After driving on Jericho for about 20 minutes without seeing Bertram or skid marks that might tip him off, Zanis announces that it's time to start knocking on doors. He pulls into the driveway of a farm where the barn is painted like an American flag, but with crosses instead of stars and the message "Jesus Is the Answer" over the stripes. A pale-faced boy with a hair dryer trained on a rooster and a bucket of soapy water nearby says he doesn't know about the motorcycle accident. Neither does his father.

At the next farm a middle-aged woman stares at Zanis blankly when he asks where the crash happened. He spots her WWJD bracelet, smiles, and says, "What would Jesus do?"

At a third farm an elderly man sitting on a parked tractor with his grandson calls out as Zanis approaches, "You're the cross guy. One of my friends pointed you out to me one time."

Zanis beams.

It might seem that after people lose a loved one there's not a lot a stranger can do to comfort them. Zanis believes otherwise. He's been inviting himself into other people's grief for about seven years now, hoping to remind them of God's presence--and of his. "It's important," he says, "for people to know someone cares."

Zanis cares about many things. He cares that the country is "losing God," that schools don't teach the Ten Commandments, that violence flourishes on America's streets because "chicken judges" won't "fry" the perpetrators.

"Our greatest need in this country," he says, "is to get back to God." If we could just do that, divorce rates would fall, crime rates would drop, the world would be a better place. According to Zanis, churches aren't reaching people: "They're just talking to themselves there." He usually goes on Sunday anyway but confesses that he regularly falls asleep in the pews. "It's just so boring!"

In Zanis's view, "there's one God, and we all have our own personal idea of how we're supposed to reach him. You don't need a preacher, you don't need a rabbi." He believes his cross ministry--which he calls Crosses for Losses--takes a powerful symbol out of the church and brings it directly to the people. But it's not simply piety or even altruism that has inspired him to construct his life around strangers' deaths. In alleviating (some have said "hijacking") mourners' grief, he seems to have found purpose in his own life.

Zanis lives in an affluent subdivision in Aurora with his wife of 29 years, Susan, and their five children, who range in age from 10 to 22. A life around power tools has made him hard of hearing; a nail that ricocheted into his left eye gave him a permanent blind spot and blurred his vision.

There's something childlike about the 53-year-old Zanis. Words and emotions seem to spill out of him unself-consciously, and he appears either unaware of certain social boundaries and conventions or unconcerned with adhering to them. He'll embrace strangers, men and women, rather than shake their hands. "I'm a hugger," he says matter-of-factly.

Zanis claims to have put up more than 7,000 crosses since he started in 1996. Photos and stories about him and the crosses have been in Rosie, Time, Life, the Weekly Standard, the Aurora Beacon News, the Chicago Tribune, the Fox River SuperSaver, and umpteen other newspapers and magazines. A photo of the crosses he planted in Littleton, Colorado, after the Columbine shootings appeared in the book *Life: Our Century in Pictures*.

He both seeks and shuns the limelight. His phone number is unlisted, but he keeps numbers for CBS, Fox, ABC, NBC, CNN, the Daily Herald, the Sun-Times, and the Tribune tacked to a wall in his basement office and has even called press conferences. "I can get into probably any newsroom immediately," he says. But when reporters try to talk to him at the site of an accident he sometimes flees. He says he doesn't want to draw attention to himself, that his "policy" is to focus on the crosses or the victims--one reason he never speaks at vigils. "I'm not trying to promote Greg Zanis. I'm trying to promote the cross."

Still, he seems to enjoy the recognition. He described himself to me several times as "famous" and excitedly pointed out that photos of his crosses have won Pulitzers--or, as he put it, "My crosses have won two Pulitzers."

He has 61 scrapbooks in his basement, most related to the cross ministry. They contain newspaper clippings, photos, and fan mail, such as the note from a teenage girl he met in a Mississippi gas station whose friend had just died in a car crash. "I'm

so glad I got to meet you," she wrote. "You rock. I hope you will never forget me because I will never forget you, because how could I forget you, cross guy? I hope I will see you again someday. I am going to miss you bunches."

When Zanis isn't on the road he builds his crosses on a property he owns in Montgomery, 11 miles from his home. The Montgomery house, where he used to live, is currently unoccupied; his workshop is in the garage. The crosses vary in size and style. Most are painted white and fitted with end caps. When possible he attaches enlarged, laminated photos of the victims clipped from newspapers and a Sharpie pen that people can use to write on the cross. When the ground is frozen he builds pedestals for the crosses. In Chicago he lays small crosses on the ground. For police officers killed in the line of duty he usually makes ornate Celtic crosses. And if the victim was "a Harley freak--if he's 55 and riding around on a hog," he uses chrome end caps.

Zanis typically makes 20 to 30 crosses a week so he won't be caught unprepared. He doesn't see that as macabre, doesn't think it suggests he's waiting for people to die. He says he's simply making sure he's ready to offer people "an act of kindness."

He admits he's made "mistakes": "I've put crosses up for Jewish people. I've put crosses up for Muslims. But that doesn't slow me down." If someone points out the error, he goes back and nails a cardboard Star of David to the cross or replaces the cross with a wreath. But he assumes crosses bring comfort to mourners, no matter what their religion. "Crosses are accepted by everybody," he says. "That's the way I see it."

He tells a story about erecting crosses in April 1999 after a car carrying a couple of Pakistani teenagers collided with a train. He noticed a church steeple near the crash site and organized members of the church's congregation to pray with him at the crosses. Later he placed a granite marker engraved with the victims' names in front of the crosses. Their parents, he says, "always wanted to be Americans, and this was the final thing." He says proudly that the parents embraced the community that had comforted them in their grief: "They're Christians now."

Zanis claims that his crosses have also inspired drivers to slow down, parents and children to stop fighting and appreciate one another more, and town officials to install traffic lights at dangerous intersections.

They've also been the subject of controversy. Zanis caused an uproar when he planted 15 crosses on a hill in Littleton overlooking Columbine High School, because two bore the names of the students responsible for the massacre. He says he made crosses for the killers because a student who'd survived the attack asked him to and because

they undoubtedly had families mourning them. And he believes they too were victims--victims of a society that offers up murder as entertainment and exiles God: "Columbine wouldn't have happened if someone would have taught them the Ten Commandments." People defaced and spit on the killers' crosses, and a girl who put a flower near them was pushed to the ground. Finally a man whose only son had been killed in the shooting took them down and destroyed them.

In late 2002 Zanis planted a cross on the front lawn of a house in an Aurora subdivision called Stonebridge, where on Christmas day a woman allegedly shot and killed her husband and wounded her daughters. Zanis also printed 500 flyers and stuffed them in people's mailboxes. One side of the flyer invited them to a prayer vigil for their slain neighbor; the other was a pitch for his remodeling services.

The Stonebridge Homeowners Association was deluged with complaints, and the Aurora Beacon News published an article in which a pastor who'd helped organize the vigil said, "I find it very offensive that anyone would use such a painful and tragic experience to promote his own business."

Zanis didn't, and still doesn't, seem to understand what the fuss was about. He was quoted as saying, "I get attacked nationally. This is minor." Today he says his critics were "looking to gain publicity off my coattails."

He prefers to focus on how his work unites people. The crosses offer mourners a place to come together and share their grief, he says, a place "to go cry at night." He adds that when he's erecting crosses or praying at vigils "it's easy for me to cry." But he's not crying for the victims or their survivors. "I'm crying for me."

Back in 1997, when Zanis had erected only 150 or so of the roadside memorials, he described his newfound compulsion to a reporter as his "own personal therapy."

A year and half earlier, on January 15, 1996, Zanis had stopped by the office of his father-in-law, Ralph Stadler, and found him lying facedown at the foot of the basement stairs. He'd been shot in the head.

Zanis became suicidally depressed and lost 50 pounds. "He went into seclusion," says Billy Cox, who's known Zanis for 30 years. "It took a while for him to come out of his shell."

When he did he was different. Cox noticed that he was more emotional and no longer interested in kicking back with a beer. "He became religious," says Susan, a born-again Christian since the early days of their marriage.

Zanis joined a support group at a local church for friends and families of murder victims. A woman in the group, knowing he was a carpenter, offered him \$20 to make a cross for her six-year-old son, who'd been killed by a stray bullet. Zanis made the cross but wouldn't take her money.

Soon, he says, everyone in the support group wanted a cross, and after making them for others, he made one for himself, sticking it on the lawn outside his father-in-law's office. It attracted the attention of the Aurora Beacon News, which published an article that said Zanis was willing to put up a cross, free of charge, for anyone who'd lost a loved one. The paper even published his phone number. The next day, he says, "the phone started ringing."

Zanis's crosses received national publicity for the first time in March 1999. A photo of the ones he'd planted on Marilyn Lemak's front lawn in Naperville, after she was arrested for killing her three children, appeared in the National Enquirer under the headline "How America's Perfect Mom Became a Monster."

The following month Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris went on their rampage at Columbine, killing 12 students and a teacher. Zanis was vacationing in Florida with his family at the time, but he says a student tracked him down. Over the protests of his wife, he drove the family straight home to Aurora. He immediately made 16 crosses--13 for the victims, 2 for the killers, and an extra in case someone died in the hospital while he was on the road. At 11:30 that night he loaded them unpainted into his truck and drove home. "I said, 'Sue, I am going to Colorado right now, and that's that,'" he recalls. "She starts crying. 'Don't go--you haven't been asleep in two days.' I said, 'There's no discussion.'"

Zanis's 15-year-old son insisted on going with him. "Ten minutes out of here," Zanis says, "I'm asleep. He's never driven before, and he's driving."

About 15 hours later they were putting the crosses up on Rebel Hill, overlooking the high school. More than 125,000 people trekked up to see them in the first few days, according to Wendy Murray Zoba's book *Day of Reckoning*.

Zanis heard about the controversy over the killers' crosses as soon as he got home. Deciding the crosses were "no longer serving a good purpose," he got back in his truck, drove the nearly 1,000 miles to Littleton, and took down the 13 that remained. Brian Rohrbough, the father who'd destroyed the killers' crosses, told reporters that Zanis had just added "insult to injury."

Back in Aurora, Zanis was again inundated with calls. "Now they want me to bring the crosses back," he recalls. He made a new set of 15--he says the original set was

locked up at a job site--then drove to Littleton for the third time that week. He arranged to meet with Rohrbough at a Denny's, and after talking out their differences he put up only 13 new crosses. The two men also appeared together on the Today Show.

Later that year Zanis began touring with the original set of Columbine crosses. He appeared with them at churches and youth events all over the country, often where one of the victims' fathers, Darrell Scott, was speaking. Along the way he held cross-building workshops.

He put about 165,000 miles on his truck in just a few years. "It was kind of a joke for a long time," he says. "I was home just on Wednesday nights for about four years."

Later Zanis made two more sets of Columbine crosses. One is in a cemetery where some of the victims are buried. The other is in the middle of a state park in Colorado, on an acre of private land that was donated to him.

On the first anniversary of the shooting Zanis returned to Littleton with the original Columbine crosses. Park district officials--who'd confiscated the second set of crosses because they were religious symbols on public land--wouldn't let him take the new crosses to Rebel Hill and directed him instead to a designated "free speech area." On the second anniversary Zanis unsuccessfully sued the park district, claiming the restriction violated his First Amendment rights.

"Every time I put up a cross I'm probably breaking the law," he says. When the crosses are on public property, officials who decide whether they stay are obliged to balance the principles of free speech, religious freedom, and separation of church and state. But unless the crosses endanger public safety--by, for instance, blocking a public walkway--Aurora officials tend to look the other way. "I don't hear a whole lot of complaining," says Dan Ferrelli, spokesman for Aurora's police department. "He's been doing it so long now people may have come to expect it." And besides, he says, most of the crosses are set up on private property.

Zanis used to get pleasure from building houses and buying antique cars, but now he describes those activities as "self-centered" or "egotistical." Now, he says, the only thing that matters to him is the cross ministry. He even gets his children to help. A son earns \$1 for each end cap he attaches; a daughter earns \$5 for two coats of paint. "I don't give them an allowance," he says. "If they want to earn money for a bicycle they can earn money for a bicycle pretty fast."

The Zanises are homeschoilers. Susan, a former public school teacher, does most of the work. Zanis, who's in charge of the art classes, requires his children to paint copies of the cross photos that have appeared in newspapers and magazines.

"I try to get Greg to do things that don't involve the crosses," says Susan, "but he wants to talk about them constantly." When they go out he often takes impromptu detours past some of the crosses. "Sometimes he wants to see if people have come by and written on them," she says. "I ask him sometimes, 'Why do you keep doing this?' I get frustrated sometimes, I do. He tells me how happy it makes people to have a marker of the last place their son or daughter was on earth."

Zanis believes he's marking the spot where souls depart from bodies. If someone happens to die in a hospital he considers that a technicality--no reason not to put a cross at the site of the fatal injury.

I once heard him refer to putting up crosses as a high. "If I haven't had a high in three days," he said, "I'm going to check out the paper." He'll wake up at 5 AM, drive to a local newspaper-distribution site, and scour the DeKalb Daily Chronicle, the Naperville Sun, the Lisle Sun, the Tribune, the Sun-Times, the Daily Herald, and the Aurora Beacon News.

Layers of victims' head shots fill a wall in his basement. Some are actual photos, others are enlarged copies of newspaper photos. Susan calls it the wall of death.

"This is Brendon Anderson," Zanis said one day, pointing to a photo. "He was killed in Aurora. Double homicide. He was put in a car, and his body was burned beyond recognition." Near Anderson's picture was one of a pretty girl with long brown hair. "Stacey Blundell," he said. "She was in a car accident in Naperville." He paused briefly, then pointed to a blond girl. "That's Cassie Bernall, a Columbine girl." Next was a teenager posing with his dog. "Devan lived in rural Mississippi, and his parents sent him to college. He was on the waterfront in Virginia on a summer holiday, and some guy came up and stabbed him in the back for no reason."

Only one middle-aged person was on the wall. "His worker killed him," said Zanis. "He was stalked and killed." He lifted up several photos, revealing one of a black child. "I don't remember him at all," he said. "Just too many faces."

I asked about a glossy photo of a Latino couple embracing. "She's in jail," he said. "She murdered him."

Zanis's need to mark a death often doesn't stop with a cross. The first time I visited his workshop a granite headstone was sitting on a shelf, engraved with a man's name, the

dates of his birth and death, and the inscription "Beloved Husband, Father, and Grandfather."

Zanis said someone--he wouldn't say who--had called with a story about the man being buried three years earlier in an unmarked grave. Apparently the man's grown children had inherited his fortune yet held a grudge against him for not helping put them through college. "They've got their own money now, but they were furious," Zanis said. "And they just wouldn't mark the dad's grave."

So Zanis was taking it upon himself to do so, even though he didn't know anyone in the family? And he was calling "beloved" a man whose family had spurned him? "That's my prerogative," he said, explaining that he planned to sneak into the graveyard at night and set up the stone."

"To him it's healing to minister in this way," says Susan. "But the part about it all that troubles me is he's dealing with death all the time." She adds, "Handling death is a real hard thing for my husband."

Early in their relationship she tried to console him after one of his cousins drowned, and the intensity of his pain struck her as unusual. "A normal person would cry a little bit," she says. "But he just cried and cried and cried."

Her father's death was worse. Stadler, Zanis says, "was my best friend. He replaced my father that I didn't get along with."

Zanis was born in Spokane, Washington, in 1950 to a Greek Orthodox priest and a Greek immigrant seamstress. His middle name--Steven--is Stavros in Greek, which, he proudly points out, means "cross."

He spent his early childhood in Nashville. His parents spoke Greek at home, and he says he didn't learn English until he started school, even though he had two older siblings (and two younger ones). Confused and alienated by the language barrier, he had trouble making friends and did poorly in school, flunking first and third grades. He began to draw and paint, and soon discovered he liked to work with his hands.

After the family moved to Chicago in the early 60s, Zanis's mother ran a church-supply shop on Dearborn, where she sold, among other items, vestments and altar cloths she'd made. His father was an assistant priest at Assumption Greek Orthodox Church on the south side, and after the family settled in Geneva he founded Saint Athanasios church in Aurora. "I think my dad drank a lot of church wine," Zanis says. He remembers being "whaled on" with extension cords and belts and says that as

punishment his father would sometimes force him to kneel "and face the community for a whole hour's service."

Despite his feelings about organized religion, he says that if his father, who's now deceased, had "used a little bit of love and tenderness I'd definitely have been a pastor or a priest. But I don't have the ability to feel that I'm worth anything. I tell people all the time I'm dirt underneath their feet."

Zanis spoke English fluently by the time he entered high school, but he continued to struggle academically and didn't graduate until he was 21. He decided to go to college anyway. He started at Waubonsee Community College, where he met Susan. He says he loved spending time at her house, largely because he was so fond of her father. He and Stadler would spend hours shooting pool, drinking Budweiser, and watching TV.

Zanis says his reluctance to speak at prayer vigils and other public events stems in part from an incident in the early 70s, when he ran for mayor of Geneva. He was still in college, he says, a long-haired hippie with little community support and essentially no platform. The only point he remembers making during the campaign was that the young people of today would be leading the country tomorrow.

According to Zanis, a few days before the election a man got into his car and ordered him, at gunpoint, to start driving. He says he'd been receiving death threats from someone who wanted him to drop out of the race and he believed this was an attempt to make good on them. He stopped near a creek as instructed, then grabbed for the man's gun. "The bullet went in my left side and then out again," he says. What happened next is a foggy memory: he floored the gas pedal, the man somehow fell out of the car, and he drove until he passed out.

Court records indicate that a grand jury investigated the incident in 1973 and that Zanis himself was the subject of the investigation. When questioned by the grand jury Zanis took the fifth--on his lawyer's advice, he says--and wasn't indicted. A couple of people in the community told me they'd heard rumors that the gunshot was self-inflicted as a way to get sympathy votes.

Whatever happened, Zanis lost the election. He dropped out of college after only a year and a half, took up carpentry, and married Susan in June 1974. A few years later he built a three-story house with the help of Stadler, who'd built the house he raised his children in.

In the early years of his marriage Zanis built houses for a living and made decent money. But he also smoked marijuana--"an ounce a week"--and bought and raced a string of fast cars, including a Camaro Z-28, a Trans Am 400, and a Super Duty 455,

in which he was once clocked doing 155. "There are things you look behind you and say, 'Did I do that?'"

In the late 70s he was sued for a problem in one of the houses he'd built. He blamed the problem on the plumber he'd hired, but he lost. He refused to pay the damages, and when a judge issued an order that his pickup be seized, he flew into a rage. While "blasted," he took a sledgehammer to the truck's body and ripped the upholstery to shreds: "I made sure there wasn't a sellable part on it."

Shortly after that he decided to lay off the pot. He settled down, and he and Susan started having children.

In the mid-90s Zanis was working for his father-in-law, managing his properties and collecting rent. He says that on January 15, 1996, when he arrived at Stadler's for lunch--a daily routine--Stadler didn't come to the door. Zanis ate his meal in his truck, then tried the door again. This time he noticed a bullet casing on the ground. He let himself in and found Stadler's body.

The murder stumped police and strained family bonds that weren't strong to begin with. Susan says her brothers insinuated to police that Zanis might have murdered their father--an accusation she suspects was the result of jealousy, because Zanis was closer to their father than they were--and Zanis pointed the finger at them.

When several months passed without an arrest Zanis put up a \$20,000 reward, and a couple of Stadler's tenants went to the police. Afterward, one of them stopped by Zanis's house to tell him her brother and one of his friends had robbed and killed Stadler. Zanis says he immediately got in his truck and raced to her apartment, where her brother had been staying. "I had a .45," he says, and the key to her apartment. "I was gonna kill the guy myself. I drove through stop signs. I was a maniac." Fortunately the police were already there when he arrived.

The suspects had separate trials. The attorney representing James Lewis, who was accused of being the triggerman, tried not only to raise doubts about his client's guilt but to raise doubts about Zanis's innocence. "They accused me in open court of doing the murder," Zanis says. "They said I had the motive--I wanted to be rich."

Lewis's attorney established that Zanis owned guns, insinuated that Zanis had been ripping off Stadler, and even got him to admit on the stand that he'd boasted to several tenants about how much money he was going to come into when Stadler died. (Stadler, who was worth millions, died without a will, according to Zanis, who says his family inherited nothing but Stadler's half-million-dollar house.)

Lewis's attorney also established a link between Zanis and one of the main informants, who, in addition to collecting the reward money, worked out a deal with prosecutors: in exchange for his testimony they would drop a felony theft case he had pending, reduce a similar felony to a misdemeanor, and end an existing probation. The attorney asked Zanis whether he'd smoked pot with the informant in the months leading up to Stadler's murder. Zanis replied that he'd pretended to smoke the pot in order to "entrap" the tenant, whom he wanted to evict. (For some reason he never did.)

The trial resulted in a hung jury. Once Lewis heard that the other defendant in the case got 30 years, he started negotiating with the prosecutors. The state's attorney's office planned to ask for the death penalty if it had to retry the case but offered a 25-year sentence for a guilty plea. That meant with good time, Lewis could be out in 12 and a half years. He took the deal.

Zanis was furious. "I wanted him to hang."

Today Zanis wears a button with Stadler's photo on it while he's erecting crosses or praying at vigils. At first the cross ministry was an outlet for his grief over Stadler's death. But his motives are no longer so clear. "There's a reason why I'm doing this," he told me one day, "and I don't really have a handle on it." Then he talked about his "littered" past, saying he easily could have died along the side of a road somewhere himself or killed a man in rage.

Some people familiar with Zanis's past believe his cross ministry is more about being in the limelight or making money than an expression of his piety. "I'm not buying it," says one person who asked not to be named. "I know too much about him."

"He really likes the spotlight," says someone else who didn't want to be named. "He's quite the self-promoter. I'm cynical. The whole thing's very strange."

Zanis usually dismisses his critics as simply being jealous of him, and he scoffs at the notion that he's trying to make money from the crosses. He says he was supposed to earn \$1,000 per appearance when he took the Columbine crosses on tour but all he ended up getting were a few free dinners at Cracker Barrel. He says he didn't complain because he couldn't fathom "making money off people's loss." In fact, he says, he used to laminate checks and cash donations that people sent him. "It made my family kind of mad."

These days he doesn't go on the road as much. He's often content to put small crosses in the mail--he recently sent some to Ohio, Hawaii, and the Czech Republic--or to rely on the cross builders who've attended his workshops. With 26 "very active" cross builders in 12 states, he says, "there are states I don't have to go to anymore."

After all these years of funding the cross ministry himself, he's started rethinking his approach. "It makes sense for me to do this for the rest of my life," he says. But it doesn't make sense to go broke doing it.

According to Susan, the cost of the lumber, gas, food, and lodging has taken a toll on the family. "We have a lot of credit-card debt because of this cross ministry," she says, estimating that Zanis has charged at least \$50,000 over the years for supplies and travel expenses. It was at her insistence that he recently stopped laminating donations.

Crosses for Losses is now officially a nonprofit, with 501(c)(3) status. Zanis has put together a board of directors and hopes to someday operate full-time out of the Montgomery house and workshop. He'd like to be more active in Chicago at some point. For now, he says, "there's too much going on in Chicago. It's not something I can handle--two murders a day on average."

Eventually he hopes to train someone to take over part of his duties. "He can live in the [Montgomery] house," he says. "He can follow Greg Zanis around, and he's going to learn to be bold. Every day he'd go around with me. He'd learn how to make [the crosses], install them, how to talk to people about scheduling a prayer vigil."

In the meantime Zanis has been holding an open house every Sunday afternoon at his garage workshop, which now doubles as a cross museum. On display are the original Columbine crosses, which he claims have been viewed by more than two million people at 505 "major events." There are also more than 120 newspaper clippings, 50 magazine articles, his children's cross paintings, T-shirts from Columbine, and aprons from Home Depots in several states (signed by employees). A map of the country hangs on the wall, marked with more than 1,000 cross stickers that represent crosses he erected in 1999. On the same wall is an Aurora ward and precinct map--Zanis calls it a "homicide map"--with stickers on nearly all the places in the city where people were murdered in the 90s.

Presiding over everything, right above the Columbine crosses, is a large portrait of Ralph Stadler in a wreath frame.

Zanis knows his crosses bring only limited comfort. After two years of driving past Stadler's cross, he says, "I got tired of looking at it. I'd just be depressed, so I took it down and recycled it. I put it up on Route 25 for Chris Clark. I should have just gotten rid of it, because I still know it's there."

Yet he clearly believes there's value in providing even limited comfort to people who are feeling raw and vulnerable. "It's the nicest thing they can have," he says. "They've lost everything, right? But they've got this cross."

When I asked Zanis one day to explain the symbolic meaning of the crosses, he said something about Jesus not being on them, then something about eternity and hope, and then, "A white cross is for purity--that's all."

He seems to see his offering as a way of bearing witness to the fact that a life that was precious to someone is gone, a way of turning the place where it ended into sacred ground. He equates not marking a death with not remembering the life, and he considers that an outrage: "It's like they didn't even live."

But while he's looking for the spot where Greg Taylor died the larger spirit of the endeavor seems to momentarily elude him. The elderly man on the tractor directs us to the site of the accident, and as we approach it, a small white cross comes into view. Someone has beaten Zanis to it.

Zanis does a careless U-turn. "I still plan to put mine up," he says.

He parks on the shoulder of the road and walks over to the cross. Made out of one-by-fours, it's significantly smaller than Zanis's eight-foot cross. "That'll last a year," he says. "That's a cheap one."

He grabs a shovel from his truck and digs a hole a couple of feet deep, a yard or so behind the little cross. "The first lawnmower that comes by will knock that down," he grumbles. "That's not gonna stand up to a good wind or snowblower or anything. Mine will be there long after that one falls down. Long after the first mowing of the grass."

After Zanis plants his cross he studies the little one more closely. A flag bandanna is wrapped around it. Flowers lie on the ground. Written on the cross are messages: "RIP Greg, we'll miss you." "May God Bless you and Your Spirit." "Ride on G-man."

Zanis seems unmoved. He points out a beer bottle lying nearby, scowls, then walks back to the truck. As we drive away he's still talking about the little cross. "That costs a dollar!" he says. "That's kind of insulting your friend, isn't it?"