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Stonecipher's solace

Pre-Paid founder turns energy to church

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ADA – Four decades ago, Harland Stonecipher lost his life savings fighting a courtroom battle. A short time later he founded the company that would become Pre-Paid Legal Services Inc.

Forty years after that, the sale of Pre-Paid now complete, Stonecipher doesn't have to worry about spending all his savings in another legal fight. His Pre-Paid stock – more than 815,000 shares – netted him \$54.2 million.

And while many retired CEOs spend their retirement managing their investments, forming other companies, taking up a new career as a consultant or writing their life story, Stonecipher is doing something different.

He's building a church.

"Selling Pre-Paid was probably one of the most difficult things I've ever done in my life," Stonecipher said. "You spend 40 years of your life with something, with people – and that's what Pre-Paid is, people – and when you spend 40 years doing that, parting company with all those folks and turning that company over to someone else is a very difficult process."

But it wasn't the sale of his company that proved to be his most difficult ordeal.

It was, instead, the death of his son.

On June 24, 2005, Stonecipher's son Brent, daughter-in-law Tina and granddaughter Nikki were killed when the right engine of Brent's Cessna 310Q failed just after takeoff in Ada. According to the family's website, the plane crashed and exploded just a few feet from an unfinished highway.

That accident changed Stonecipher in a profound way.

Even now, more than six years later, he is still working to come to terms with the loss of half of his family.

"It seems the longer you get away, the time from the loss, the greater the pain," he said. "People usually think time will solve it, but it doesn't. It gets worse because you're getting farther and far-

ther away from the ones you love."

Stonecipher said his fear is that his son and family will be forgotten.

"In our case, that entire family: Brent, Tina and Nikki, that family is gone. That family doesn't exist anymore. And that's one-half of our total family," he said.

To ensure his son is remembered, Stonecipher is building a chapel to honor his child and others. It was a way, he said, to heal and help others. When complete, the chapel will serve as a free memorial for other families who have lost children.

"People can come here, no matter where they are from, and establish a memorial to their children," he said. "It won't cost them anything. It will be a way to make sure their children are remembered."

But the memorial isn't his only plan.

A member of Ada's Life Community Church, Stonecipher watched the church outgrow its home. And when church officials began looking for a new home, Stonecipher offered to help.

"We've gotten bigger than our existing building," said Mickey Keith, Life Community's senior pastor. "And I started looking around for another building to occupy or remodel."

That resulted in a conversation with Stonecipher that, in turn, resulted in another project – Stonecipher's announcement that he would cover the \$3 million to \$3.5 million need to fund construction of a new church and a memorial chapel.

"Harland and (wife) Shirley announced they would underwrite the cost of the church and the chapel," Keith said. "I think they believe very strongly in what we're trying to do."

But the idea, Keith said, isn't to remember just Stonecipher's family.

"Harland and Shirley were put in a community they never thought they would be in," he said. "They are parents who have lost children. They see this as a way to help all those who have lost children."

The building's architect, Hugh Sprague, said both church and chapel would have a modern design that leveraged technology for the memorial.

"You might have a computer and a big screen where you could type in someone's name and that information pops up," Sprague said in a statement announcing the building. "We could have



Harland Stonecipher. PHOTO BY M. SCOTT CARTER

the memorial cubes, like at the OKC Memorial. You could put the child's picture in one of those cubes and then there would be trinket or a little card – anything you would want to put in there as a remembrance to them."

In addition to the church and the chapel, Stonecipher said he hoped to teach classes at the facility on how to be successful.

"I hope to be able to teach a course, called A Blueprint to Success. I want to encourage people. I'm excited about doing that," he said. "I want to bring in a lot of our Pre-Paid people, because they are proof of our blueprint. We have so many success stories out there, people who would have never made it in corporate America but have become very wealthy. I want to tell those stories."

A well-known contributor to both Republican and Democratic candidates,

Stonecipher said he also planned to stay active in state and national politics.

"When someone says to me, 'I don't want to be politically involved,' I think they are saying they don't care about their country or they don't care about their kid's future or their life," he said. "I want to stay very active and be a part of that choice."

Still, for Harland Stonecipher, the future isn't about his new fortune, the church, or his role as political and business mentor.

For Harland Stonecipher, the future is about helping others.

"Harland is very strong-willed and very focused," Keith said. "He's very determined and he's going to be involved in something. I think all this is his way of helping others and healing. Anytime you reach out of yourself and help others, you are a success."