

Slain trooper remembered 37 years later
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VENICE - A memorial for a slain trooper will take place 37 years after his murder later this weekend. Claude Baker Jr. was the first Florida Highway Patrol trooper in the area to be killed in the line of duty back in 1973. It happened along U.S. 41 in Venice. The whole event was started by a local boy working to be an eagle scout.

Baker is the only FHP trooper to have been killed in the line of duty in Sarasota County history. Decades later, there was very little which signified his sacrifice. "I thought it was a travesty and sought to rectify it," says 16-year-old Tab Brewer. He thought that it just wasn't right that Baker's death was going unnoticed all these years later. "Nobody knew except for maybe the family and a few troopers knew the story. Unless you tripped over his headstone you would not have known Claude Baker lived or died."

Lieutenant Thomas Przybylowicz with FHP says in November of 1973, Baker pulled over Henry Payne -- an escaped prisoner in a stolen car that he took from a woman he raped. When Baker walked up to the car, he was shot twice and died. "Trooper Baker made a traffic stop and unfortunately the person involved in the traffic stop had a bad criminal history...was not a friend to law enforcement."

Payne was soon caught in Charlotte County and is currently serving a life sentence in prison. In 1977 the FHP building in Venice was named after him, but few notice. "You can never go wrong by remembering a sacrifice. I don't see a problem with it happening 37 years later. The building is already named in his memory, but unless you come into the building and look at it and read the plaque you really don't have any way of knowing."

With the 10th grader's help, as part of an eagle scout project, there is now a sign out front. Brewer's troop erected a cross on the side of 41 at the scene of the incident. They're also trying to get the stretch of road named after the fallen trooper. "I think he is a remarkable young man that came up with this idea and got everything working. I commend him highly for it."

For Brewer it just seemed like the right thing to do. He's a young man who has made it his mission to remember an old story...making sure we honor those who help keep us safe. "We have to honor our law enforcement. He gave the ultimate sacrifice and law enforcement should know that we support them."

Right now lawmakers are discussing naming the section of U.S. 41 after Trooper Baker, from the spot where he was killed to his resting spot at Sarasota Memorial Gardens.

A memorial will take place Saturday morning at the courthouse in Venice starting at 9am. Trooper Baker's family and friends are also coming to remember.