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Essay #1: SEU And Public Memory (St. Edward’s University Seal) REWRITE

Rhetoric and public memory is something that is vital in the understanding of why a community is the way it is, and why it was. When it comes to the idea of public memory, it is defined in Dr. King’s slides that it is “a body of beliefs and ideas about the past that help a public understand both its past, present and by implication, its future. ‘Bodnar, 1992, p. 6’”. At a school like St. Edward’s University which was founded in 1885 (*About | St. Edwards University in Austin, TX*, n.d.), there is such a rich history, contributed by staff, faculty, and most importantly, the students. In this essay, I will be conducting public memory research and analysis about the St. Edward’s University Seal and how the meanings of the symbols hold meaning until this day as well as some of the impactful events that have taken place at the seal that serve as public memory events to students past, present and future. I will describe the artifact in detail and then go into more detail about an event that took place in the Spring semester of 2024 which impacted many students and has continued to be a talking point for many St. Edward’s students. This event is the removal of the Pride flag from the coffee shop which led to protests held on the seal. I argue that although these are events that took place and still hold a lot of significance for many of the students, the University has attempted to keep this situation under wraps and a lot of new students have no idea that students like myself skipped classes and protested all day for their identity to be seen as well as the student body to be heard. This essay will give a better understanding of why public memory pertaining to the seal is important and still holds significance. I believe that the seal holds one of the rhetorical assumptions that “Public memory narrates a ‘common identity’. It also offers to individuals a symbolic connection with the group and a sense of belonging to it.” as stated by Dickinson, Blair, and Ott.

The St. Edward’s University seal is located in the heart of the campus right outside Holy Cross Hall and Ragsdale. Many students have to walk through it or around it to get to many different places around the campus.The seal has had its time in the sun, as there is mold growing on the insides of the letters, however, it is power washed now and then in order for its appearance to look better and sure it looks clean. In regards to how the seal looks, it is the shape of a circle to signify “complete and all embracing as the very ends and limits of creation itself.” (Munday Library - Archives & Special Collections, n.d.), with the words “St. Edward’s University” on top and “Austin, Texas” on the bottom. Inside the circle, we get the shape of a shield that has multiple different symbols inside it that all signify something different such as a cross, an anchor, a mace, a Lonestar, and a heart as well as a few others “of our patria, our home and fatherland, these beloved United States of America. Upon a field serrated with the LIGHT and DARK of life, emblazoned the- CROSS of Christianity, under which banner we joyfully pass our college days: Fortunate to be led educationally forward by devoted- BROTHERS OF (that same)- HOLY CROSS: Symbolic of their Congregation, and taken from their Community seal, is the- ANCHOR (underneath reading Spes Unica our only hope, admitting no other) Opposite the regal- MACE of our patron and namesake, the great King Edward the Confessor, Saint of our illustrious ancestors, in whose Faith we carry forward our Christian heritage. Above the- RIVER of life-giving water, symbol of course, in actuality the Linie Colorado, running across the state of the- LONE STAR, the great state of Texas, under whose sky we live and enjoy; On whose banks we shure the present capital city, a name long ago made illustrations by the great Saint- HEART, shot through by twin arrows of love and leam-ling, whose heirs we are, and will continue to be.” (Munday Library - Archives & Special Collections, n.d.) (Courtesy of St. Edward’s University Archivist and Special Collections Librarian, Travis H. Williams).

Protests create a sense of common identity, but also challenge it in some ways. When there are people at a protest all together protesting a similar or the same idea, that is a common identity all those people share. However, if we take an outsider's perspective of the protest, then we have a sort of paradox where the people participating in the protest have a common identity but the people who are not apart of it do not share that same identity but then again, all the people outside of the protest share the identity that they do not agree with the protest or just do not care etc. By standing on the seal, students are challenging a social norm or challenging the idea of a common identity because of the fact that this is something that is not common to do.

The first protest I would like to discuss is the protest held in February of 2023 regarding student concerns about graduation being held on the soccer field at the university. The way it was challenged as a common identity was because students were outraged and upset by this due to the fact that the students, faculty, and staff as well as family members would have to sit or stand outside in the Texas sun for a ceremony that takes almost four hours. Not only were students upset by that issue, but they said it would be a problem for many of their disabled peers to get down to the soccer fields (School of Arts and Humanities, St. Edward’s University, 2023). These issues led to a protest held on the seal which unfortunately due to cold weather and harsh winds, lost momentum after about one hour. Many students decided that they would stand on the seal and dance around on it to music being played which holds a strong message considering the superstition that I stated earlier about not stepping on the seal. This event holds a lot of public memory for students who have now graduated as well as students like myself who were still on campus and witnessed it happening firsthand. This protest led to a conversation between student leaders and St. Edward’s faculty to discuss a more accessible and safe graduation for the graduating seniors (School of Arts and Humanities, St. Edward’s University, 2023). I asked a former St. Edward’s University student who was a part of this graduation ceremony, Abbi Porrier, what the result of the graduation was and she said “Their solution was to get a tent. But there wasn’t adequate cooling like fans or misters and it was still at 2 pm but at least it provided shade.”. This is just one example of public memory and how events held on the seal hold a memory for so many people to this day and most likely for the rest of their lives.

The next impactful and arguably the most successful event that has happened on the seal was the pride flag protests held in February of 2024. The events that led to the protest started when people started wondering why the pride flag was not back up in the coffee shop after renovations were done over the summer and when the cafe was asked to put it back up, they refused. People even decided to just bring in their own pride flags and hang them up but they were quickly taken down by staff. Queer students, as well as many others in the student body, were extremely upset and an Instagram account was started for students to stay updated and learn a little more about what exactly was going on. Not only did this catch a lot of attention on campus, but the removal of the pride flag caught the attention of news publications such as The Austin American-Statesman saying “Since 2018, an LGBTQ+ pride flag has hung from the ceiling of a buzzing coffeehouse on St. Edward's University's campus in South Austin, a central symbol that made students feel accepted at the private, Catholic university.” (Kepner, 2024). On February 27, 2024, students peacefully protested outside on and around the seal from 10 am until 6 pm, chanting and sharing stories about why they felt like having the pride flag back in the coffee shop was so important to them. For many students, seeing the pride flag in the coffee shop was one of the main reasons they chose St. Edward’s over any other school (Almendarez, Caumon, 2024). This protest was followed by an installation of over 1000 pride flags on the lawn outside the Fine Arts building (Lawrence, 2024). Not only that, but this protest led to a vote of no confidence against President Montserrat Fuentes (Lawrence, 2024).

I used this protest to give an example of a moment in time when a massive amount of people all have a very similar experience and memory of an event that took place, specifically at the St. Edward’s University seal. Unlike the last example of a protest, this protest resulted in the pride flag being put back up, and many students, like myself can collectively remember what it felt like for us to see that flag go back where it belongs and see the faces of so many students who felt like their identity was being concealed, finally given the justice is deserved (Caumon, 2024). This is one of the most influential moments that I have ever personally experienced as a student here at St. Edward’s. However, of course, there are students, whether they are transfers or incoming freshmen who are not aware of the protest and the story because there is no plaque or anything written anywhere that remembers the event.

To conclude, previously I said that the seal holds a certain level of public memory in regards to public memory and common identity with a focus on protests that have happened at the seal. Some of the people who are absent when considering the seal itself, are people of color and women. There is no representation of them anywhere in the seal and mostly talks about the Catholic faith so people who do not follow that same religion are left out as well. In the sense of common identity, there is a sense of common identity when it comes to the idea that yes, everyone who goes to St. Edward’s shares a similar identity, which is that we go to school here. However there is also a sense of common identity in separate parties as well. One of my key takeaways is that eventually, public memory dies out. People die or people move away or in this case, students graduate and the memory of an event fades away. However, people who do remember the event, will always remember it and in some way, have a connection with the people who experienced it as well. In regards to who is remembered and who is not, I think there was a large emphasis on the Queer students who protested, but there were faculty there, there were allies there. The people who were not directly impacted but cared enough to be there for the student body are often disregarded or just not remembered at all and I think it is important we do not take those people for granted. The St. Edward’s University seal not only serves as a place for people to look at and remember they are a Hilltopper, but it also serves as a place for the student body to be seen and heard.

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Graphic given, courtesy of *St. Edward’s University Archivist and Special Collections Librarian*, Travis H. Williams

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