

Friends of student killed by senior driver mourn, question regulations

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Every day, massage students at Spa Pima in Gilbert walk past a makeshift memorial with teddy bears, candles and personal messages penned on posters that honor Lacey Gruntorad.

They miss Lacey, 22, a giving young woman known for brightening the day of others.

They honor her memory and wish she hadn't been killed on Sept. 27, when an 86-year-old driver suddenly plowed her car into their classroom.

"She was always sharing herself with others, being a loving person," said Ronnie Harris, a fellow student who witnessed the bizarre wreck but was not injured.

"We believe she is still with us," he said. "We acknowledge her presence when we walk past here. We say, 'We love you, Lacey, you are still with us.'"

The seven other students injured in the accident returned to school on Monday and are following the advice Lacey herself gave them on a "vision board," in which students list their goals, said Mark Luebke, president of Pima Medical Institute.

He said Lacey was in only the second week of a seven- to eight-month program that culminates in becoming a licensed massage therapist. Lacey's vision board listed such goals as operating her own massage business in five years and starting a family within 10 years, friends said.

But, in the middle of the board, she listed a simple cliché that now has new meaning, Luebke said: "The show must go on."

As Gilbert police continue to investigate the fatality, friends of Lacey's are remembering how she enriched their lives in small but important ways, and they wonder whether Arizona should tighten its testing of senior drivers.

At a fundraiser at a Gilbert Dairy Queen this week, friends remembered how Lacey was passionate about playing the violin in the Highland High School orchestra. She also performed with the Strolling Strings, musicians who would visit nursing homes to entertain seniors in exchange for donations.

Rachel Tinimbang, a friend who also participated in Strolling Strings, recalled how much Lacey enjoyed speaking with the seniors after performances to brighten their day, while other students simply waited outside for their ride home.

"People would tell her, 'You remind me of my granddaughter,'" Tinimbang said. "She would stick around and talk to anyone."

Sue Fox said Lacey worked at a nearby Starbucks, only a short distance from Spa Pima, and would attach a cute note to her coffee cup every morning and hand her a flower.

"Lacey was someone who cared about every customer who came through the door," Fox said.

Dee McCall, whose son, Alan, dated Lacey in high school, said she was a sweet girl with a beautiful smile. Her death is tragic, McCall said. "No one knows the impact her life would have had if she had lived," she added.

Sgt. Jesse Sanger, a Gilbert police spokesman, said that although the investigation probably won't be completed until mid-November, the driver is unlikely to be charged.

"At this time, they (investigators) do not foresee any criminal charges being pressed against the driver of the vehicle," Sanger wrote in an e-mail. "However, that could change as the investigation continues."

He said one issue is that the driver had no intent to injure anyone. Police said she was pulling away from a nearby bank, hit a parked car and accelerated into the spa.

Harold Sanders, a retired Arizona Department of Public Safety officer and a spokesman for the Motor Vehicle Division, said state law requires anyone age 65 or older to pass a vision test every five years.

Drivers are required to go to an MVD office for the test. Family members and officers also can send in a form, asking for an additional evaluation, if they believe a driver is unfit to be behind the wheel.

Nationally, collisions in which elderly drivers confused the accelerator with the brake have caused much-publicized catastrophes, including a Santa Monica, Calif., case in which 10 people were killed at a farmers market in 2003.

A national study by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety from 1999 to 2004 found that drivers ages 75 to 84 have a rate of three deaths per million miles driven — the same as teenagers — and that drivers 85 or older have a death rate four times as high as that of teens.

But Bruce Hamilton, a foundation spokesman, said senior drivers often are unfairly blamed after accidents such as Lacey's death in Gilbert and the Santa Monica case.

Although such tragic incidents tend to get a lot of media coverage, they also don't happen very often, he said.

Hamilton noted that seniors often restrict themselves by driving only during the day, are more likely to wear seat belts, usually drink and drive less than other age brackets, and don't text while driving.

"Age is not a good predictor of driving ability," Hamilton said. "The lion's share of an older driver's risk is due to the fragility of that driver."

AAA hopes to release the results of another study early next year that will make recommendations to states on how to regulate senior drivers more effectively, he said.

A second five- to 10-year study is tracking the driving behavior of 3,000 older drivers to determine the specific factors that cause accidents, such as medical conditions or reactions to prescription medications, Hamilton said.

In Arizona, statistics from "Crash Facts," a yearly publication of the state Department of

Transportation, indicate that Arizona in 2012 had 289,787 registered drivers 75 years or older, or about 6 percent of the state's 4.7 million drivers.

Although 1,120 drivers had some level of involvement in fatal crashes during 2012, only 47 were in the 75-or-older age bracket, according to the same report.

Source: http://www.azcentral.com/community/gilbert/articles/20131011massage-student-killed-senior-driver-questions.html?nclick_check=1