

Anti-drunken driving signs to honor victims

November 2, 1998

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After three Troy teens lost their lives last year to a drunken driver, mournful friends and family members piled the crash site high with flowers, candles, pictures, letters and teddy bears.

But the makeshift memorial at Long Lake and Crooks is gone.

It will be replaced today -- with the blessing of the teens' families -- by a sign with an educational message. County officials hope to use more than two dozen of the signs to replace shrines all around Oakland County.

The signs, which read "Drunk Driving -- You can't afford it," are believed to be the first official markers in the state for sites of drunken-driving fatalities. They won't identify the dead or give dates of crashes, but county officials and drunken-driving activists hope motorists realize that the signs memorialize drunken-driving tragedies.

The signs are the brainchild of a county official in charge of finding alternatives to jail for nonviolent criminals, many of whom have been convicted on alcohol-related offenses.

"There has been a problem" with roadside shrines, said George Miller, who manages the Community Corrections Division. "You hear about cities removing memorials and then people getting upset," Miller said last week. The signs fill a need to remember victims while avoiding litter problems when memorials are damaged by weather and vandals, he said.

Miller came upon the idea while driving through Pennsylvania and seeing signs that mark drunken-driving tragedies.

He adapted the message to Michigan with help from the father of one of the teens who died at the Troy site last year.

Now, Miller is targeting "two or three corners in almost every community" in Oakland County, "all the way from Ortonville up in the north to Ferndale, and east to west as well."

Top county officials and David and Gail Easterbrook of Troy, whose daughter died at the site, will attend the 10 a.m. unveiling.

Ashley Easterbrook, 18, died June 3, 1997, along with friends Michael Jamieson and Andrew Stindt, both 19.

David Easterbrook worked with Miller to develop the signs and is paying \$75 apiece for the first five going up.

"This sign isn't so much being put up in memory of Ashley or Andy or Michael. It's more to say, 'Hey, pay attention. Drunk driving does cost all of us.'

"Ultimately, it costs lives," he said.

Last year, tokens of mourning were piled onto the site at Long Lake and Crooks.

Ashley Easterbrook was a lifeguard. Her parents found a lifeguard hat and whistle amid the ribbons and keepsakes.

Grateful for the sometimes-weather-beaten show of sympathy, they sought a more permanent memorial. David Easterbrook asked the county to consider putting signs at each drunken-driving accident site, listing victims' names.

"As an emotional dad, that's what I thought was right at the time," he said.

He changed his mind after seeing the design for the sign going up today.

"We've mourned for more than a year. Now we have to get beyond this," he said, saying the sign is "positive" and "gets the word out."

The father of another Oakland County youth who died in a drunken-driving crash last year said he would welcome a sign at the site of his son's death.

But David Thomas said his relatives aren't ready to take down a shrine they and their friends assembled in Auburn Hills.

Photos, crosses and keepsakes in memory of Oakland University sophomore Jonnathan Thomas are attached to a pole at Snellbrook and Walton. Thomas' mother landscaped it with mums and dried flowers.

After vandals twice removed the shrine, David Thomas said, "We had a large picture of Jon laminated, and I got up on an eight-foot ladder.

"We placed it on plywood, and it's going to be up there a while."

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