



April 14, 2008

Memorial stakes tell sad stories of needless loss

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Staff Writer

The bustle of traffic around South and Highland avenues in Rochester reflects a city moving forward.

But the names and dates inked onto 507 wooden stakes plunged into a grassy knoll in Highland Park at the intersection Sunday mark moments frozen in time for the victims of drinking and driving accidents.

"When you pound in one stake, it's one person," said Justin Hann, 17, a master sergeant with the 209th Regiment of the New York National Guard Corps of Cadets that volunteered to help set up the annual Mothers Against Drunk Driving memorial. "When you pound in 20, it finally hits you: This is all because of drinking and driving."

The Memorial Stake Garden, as the production is known, was organized by the western New York affiliate of MADD and serves as a precursor to a memorial service to be held at the location on Wednesday at noon.

The stakes, each with a red MADD ribbon affixed to the top, stand sentinel under a flag reading, "We'll Remember You," a grim reminder that closure is often elusive for injured victims and grief-stricken families of the dead, even decades after the crashes.

There is Kenneth James Curtis (killed in a crash on Jan. 17, 1979); Louise Rosdahl (Sept. 10, 1985); Christel Lathers (April 16, 1995); and Michael Civiletti, who was on his way home from a church choir rehearsal on Oct. 14, 2006, when his life was snuffed out by a drunken driver.

"It's just a piece of wood, but each stake tells the story of an entire life, an entire family," said Tracey Holbrook, 48, the MADD chapter administrator.

Holbrook, of Hilton, whose parents were injured by a drunken driver in a 1997 crash that killed their next-door neighbors, said she still gets choked up recalling the crash.

"We all think we're doing OK, then we hear a name or recall a circumstance, and it brings you down," Holbrook said.

Not every DWI victim from Monroe, Livingston and Ontario counties — the counties represented by the chapter — is visible at the memorial. Stakes are only named by request.

The chapter estimates that the stakes would number in the thousands if every victim of the last four decades were named. In 2005, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 524 traffic fatalities in New York state were alcohol-related.

"It's sad," said Tamira DeJesus, 13, a cadet corporal who stapled red ribbons to the stakes. "I wonder how difficult it is for the families."

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