



March 29, 2009

Aquinas grieves for senior killed in Greece crash

Justina Wang and Alan Morrell
Staff writers

GREECE — Hours before Joseph Mueller died in a car crash early Saturday, the 17-year-old Greece teen had attended a mother-son dinner dance sponsored by his high school, Aquinas Institute.

"Joseph was able to have a last dance with his mother," said Aquinas President Michael Daley of the event at the Diplomat Party House in Gates. "I'm sure it will be a lifetime memory for her."

The night turned tragic about 2 a.m. Saturday when the crash occurred on Ling Road, killing Mueller, a senior at Aquinas, and injuring the driver and another passenger, who both have ties to the Dewey Avenue school.

The driver, Tia M. Gerstner, 18, of 152 Cherry Road, also a senior at Aquinas, was charged with driving while intoxicated. The other passenger, William Kent, 21, graduated from Aquinas three years ago, Daley said.

Greece police said Gerstner's car struck a tree, overturned and hit the front porch of a house at 94 Ling Road. All three occupants were taken to Strong Memorial Hospital, where Mueller died. Gerstner and Kent sustained minor injuries, said police Sgt. Bob Trowbridge. Daley, who stressed that alcohol was not served at the Friday night dance, said Mueller was ejected from the vehicle.

A prayer service is planned for 5 p.m. today at Aquinas, 1127 Dewey Ave. About 200 people turned out Saturday for a prayer service at the school.

"There is a certain amount of anger," said Daley, who has a son who attends Aquinas. "As a parent and an administrator, this is something you don't want to have to practice for. No matter how much we try to train our children, this could have been prevented.

"Of course, mistakes are made. But some mistakes are bigger than others."

Gerstner has been released from the hospital. A spokeswoman at Strong said she could not provide information about Kent.

The crash was the second driving-related tragedy to affect the Gerstner family, Daley said; a brother of Gerstner's died three years ago when he was struck by a car while bicycling.

Police said they are continuing to investigate and said Gerstner likely will face additional charges.

Mueller and Gerstner both were preparing to graduate June 20 as members of the approximately 175-student class of 2009. Daley said Aquinas has reached out to the Mueller family, including an older brother, Michael, who graduated from the school in 2007, and his younger sister Danielle, a freshman at Aquinas.

Hundreds of students gathered for Saturday's prayer service and spoke with grief counselors, he

said.

Poster boards on a table in the school were filled with condolences from students and staff, with messages such as "Joe was such a great kid, he could always make people laugh," and "I will remember Joe as bright and creative, someone who really got into his art."

Mary Ortolani, who lives at the house where the car crashed, said she was sleeping in the back with her 10-month-old grandson and didn't hear anything until her neighbor called. She and her grandson were not injured.

Margaret Ranous, the neighbor who called, woke up when she heard the commotion and someone ringing the doorbell. When she and her husband, Harold, opened the door, she said she saw a frantic young man.

"He was covered in blood. He said he needed help right away, could we please help him and call 911."

The Ranouses called for an ambulance and went outside to try to help. Ranous said she grabbed towels but quickly realized they needed more serious medical attention.

She said she saw one teen on the ground, and his friends hysterically crying and hovering over him.

"I just stood in the background and tried to calm them down," she said. "I said, 'Listen, the sirens are coming. We got help on the way.' But it was very upsetting. I stood there shaking for a long time."

Ranous said teens had been driving by the scene of the accident Saturday, bringing flowers and pausing to look.

"We just hope they learn from this," she said. "We couldn't do much, but we did all we could for the poor kids. I hope the parents find at least some comfort in that."

In addition to today's prayer service, grief counselors will be available today and Monday at Aquinas. A prayer service for faculty and staff members will be held at 7 a.m. Monday, and the entire student body will attend another prayer service at 8:30 a.m. Monday. The school will close on the date of Mueller's funeral, Daley said.

JUWANG@DemocratandChronicle.com

AMORRELL@DemocratandChronicle.com
