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## Lost lives remembered

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*Roadside memorials help families of loved ones heal.*

**By COLLEEN M. FARRELL / [cfarrell@mpnewspapers.com](mailto:cfarrell@mpnewspapers.com)**

The graffiti sprayed on the road tells part of the story.

"We remember," it says. "I love you." And there is a date, written inside three large hearts: "7/21/04 Forever

On the side of Lehigh Station Road, T-shirts, skateboards and a cross encircle a large white rock. And stuff with matted fur watch over the spot, holding bunches of flowers.

It's a roadside memorial and it jars the senses, reminding those left behind of a tragic day and a lost love, or a somber curiosity in passersby. They can be found in most every town, and their arrival is as sudden as the events that inspire them.

Some are meticulously maintained, while others weather with time and healing.

Some are shrouded in mystery: A wreath of pink, yellow, white and blue flowers watches over the intersection of Henrietta and Rush-Henrietta Town Line roads. It marks the spot where a toddler was killed, according to the Henrietta Department of Public Works.

Others, like a white cross on Rush-Scottsville Road, bear a name, Gregory "Pops" Hopkins as well as a date, 12, 2003.

But psychologists and survivors agree they all encourage reflection on the part of families and strangers alike.

For motorists, the visible reminders of tragedy and grief may remind them of their own sadness over a lost loved one. Victor counselor James Leitgeb said.

"They take us away from our everyday viewing of the world," he said. "I think when they're distracting to someone, probably deep down inside is feeling just alarmed at being reminded of their own mortality."

And for loved ones, the memorials consecrate the ground in a way, "because that's the last place their loved ones will ever be seen."

on the Earth alive," he said.

For Paul and Bernadette Kato, the memorial that sprang up after their son's death serves as a comfort. Where Beckwith Road meets Lehigh Station, a garden arch, rock and bench mark where their 17-year-old son, Matthew, was killed by a drunken driver July 21, 2004.

Kato's mom, Bernadette, said a friend of her son started the memorial.

"I have no idea who made the bench or put up the arch but every now and then someone leaves flowers," Kato said.

She straightens the piece of ground when things become weathered. She stored the bench over the winter but it blew out into the street. Other times, she cleans up the mess left by vandals.

She suspects a disgruntled Rochester Institute of Technology student was the one who wrote obscenities on the rock.

Other than that, "people have been reasonably respectful," she said.

She tried planting flowers, but the lack of rain this summer hindered their growth.

"I would take four gallons of water with me over there," Kato said. "Some of them survived, and I put mulch around the rock."

Amid the religious candles and glass holders, she finds messages to her son, some signed, many anonymous.

"Last year after Matthew's accident a lot of kids would take markers and leave messages on the rock," she said.

The scattered flowers and messages are similar to a gravestone because they memorialize a lost life, Leitgeb said.

"You want the good relationships in life to live on or their memory to live on," he said. "One of the ways people deal with their sadness is to put a sign up along the highway."

On the day after the anniversary of her son's death, Kato stopped by the memorial, to read the words of love left by his friends.

"I could even see the people, the kids, had used spray paint on the road, writing messages to Matthew," she said.

At this year's Rush-Henrietta graduation, "when they called his name, my son, Paul, who is 22, went up on stage to get his honorary diploma and all the kids gave a standing ovation for him." And she is touched by his classmate who devoted a page to him in the yearbook.

"We're finding out that he had touched a lot of lives in ways that we didn't even know about," she said.

The memorial has brought her comfort, knowing her son's memory is in many hearts.

"Somebody's taking care of it," she said. "Somebody's thinking of Matt."

