

Scenes of loss

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Driving west on Woodbury Road approaching the Seaford

Oyster Bay Expressway overpass, a large red bow hugs a 30-foot oak tree on the north side. A closer look reveals a faded blue University of [North Carolina Tar](#)

Heels baseball cap screwed securely into the trunk.



A card reads: "Even though we're miles apart on Valentine's Day, you will

always be in my thoughts." Blown out pieces of tire are strewn between fresh

white, burned-down tea candles. A five-point wooden star at the Woodbury site

simply says: "Good-Bye Brian." Someone lovingly keeps a vigil at this roadside

memorial.

Brian Harley Assa, 16, died on impact at 1:52 on the clear, crisp morning

of Jan. 19. He was speeding on Woodbury Road with passenger David Darvas, first sideswiping their blue Jetta against the Seaford Oyster Bay Expressway wall, then crashing into a Long Island Power Authority utility pole, stopping at the tree. Assa was driving with a learner's permit.

Further west, in Plandome, where Plandome Road curves just before Shoreview Lane, bundles of daisies, roses and candles were placed with care beneath a sprawling tree for 18-year-old Anthony Saldana.

A poster covered with scrawled notes reads, "I'm going to miss your laughter." A homemade CD, "Only the Good Die Young," is tucked beneath black

electrical tape. Broken splinters of fence and shards of glass still lie where Saldana was killed on the morning of Oct. 3 while two cars sped southbound down the road. Eighteen-year-old Juan Guzman lost control and hit the tree.

Saldana, a passenger in his car, was pronounced dead at North Shore University Hospital in Manhasset. Police say Guzman was charged with driving while intoxicated.

Roadside memorials dot Long Island's state highways, county parkways and roads, sending a message of "we miss you and will never forget." Names appear, such as Umair Ejaz, who died near Exit 15 on the Southern State Parkway on Aug. 13, 2006. Some memorials have been around for years, such as a small cross for Aram Kasparian, killed in 1995 where the Wantagh Parkway connects to the westbound Northern State. Others are new, such as the memorial for Amanda Malloy, a fourth-grade teacher killed earlier this month while jogging in Huntington.

Malloy's friend Elena Kentros, 29, from Huntington, has been bringing tea and an apple to the memorial every day. "She was a huge Red Sox fan and used to have her students sleep with red socks on, so they would win," Kentros said.

Kasparian's mother, Naris Kasparian, explained she had only visited the memorial once since Aram was killed on July 27, 1995, in a motorcycle accident. Even all these years later it has been Aram's friends who maintain the cross put up in his memory.

Roadside memorials play a therapeutic role for some people. E. Jean Scully, a psychotherapist, bereavement counselor and retired professor at the School of Social Welfare at Stony Brook University, explained the bereavement process. "When a loved one is violently taken, it leaves you unable to say goodbye. It's a shock and creates a helpless need to connect to that spot." Scully recommends that victims' families display items that loved ones would want to celebrate his or her life.

Vanessa Assa, 29, regional manager for Sportography studio in [Miller Place](#),

devotedly pays homage to her brother Brian by guiding his friends and grooming the Woodbury Road memorial. "He would have been 17 on Oct. 22. This season is hard. These will be the first holidays without him." Assa released birthday balloons and hung a fresh photo of Brian onto the tree.

"It's the last place he was alive," said his father, Jerry Assa, 56. "I visit the tree often to talk to Brian. We will always miss him."

More memorials

Bereavement experts, counselors, police and transportation officials believe the number of roadside memorials is increasing, though no one keeps statistics. Most agreed that as varied ethnic groups find their way to the [United States](#), it brings diverse ways of grieving death. In places such as [Puerto Rico](#) and [Mexico](#), roadside memorials are a common way of life.

"Since 9/11, the United States has become less of a death-denying culture. Public displays give you permission to grieve and to express to the world that your loved one's life mattered," Scully said.

Det. Sgt. Anthony Repalone, a [Nassau](#) police spokesman, said, "The community compassionately tolerates these temporary memorials. There are no clear-cut laws or mandates to handle these.

"Certainly if they become unsafe as excessive obstructions or aesthetically inappropriate we have to do something," he said. "But usually over time the sites dwindle as the weather disintegrates the flowers."

For Denna Cohen, president and victim advocate of the Long Island chapter of Mothers Against Drunk Driving, creating a roadside memorial was not the right choice for them. The Cohens' 21-year-old daughter, Jodi, was driving home at 7 at night after getting a haircut. A four-time offending drunken driver struck her on Route 112 and Grove Street in [Port Jefferson](#) on June 1, 1989. Cohen was in a coma and died 23 days later. Carolyn Putsis, convicted of second-degree manslaughter, was released with five years' parole after serving 10 years in Albion State Prison.

"My family and I felt it would be too difficult to see that site during our day-to-day travels," said Cohen, 64, resident of Coram for 37 years. "It didn't feel right for us."

Cohen instead dedicates her services to helping victims' families through MADD.

Possible danger

Memorials sometimes begin with funeral flowers and grow larger as grieving continues or milestone/anniversary dates come up. But Department of Transportation, highway maintenance and police officials feel memorials can be hazardous.

Visiting roadside memorial sites can be dangerous. At a 2007 accident site on the Wolf Hill Road exit off the Northern State Parkway, people gathered to leave items on the median for a few days, causing traffic and dangerous conditions, according to police.

Eileen Peters, spokeswoman for the Long Island Region of New York State Department of Transportation said, "Technically you need a permit to perform any kind of work on a state highway. But there are no New York State or federal laws regulating roadside memorials."

Over the years, Peters recalled that there have been sites removed due to safety, but overall among police, state and county officials, the sites are left alone. "The Department of Transportation allows temporary memorials to remain providing that they do not pose any interference, danger or hazard."

The Assas explained that the memorial began building within hours of Brian's death as an outpouring of emotion from friends. Even LIPA workers reconstructing the broken utility pole respectfully took a break to let mourners grieve.

"It was so sudden. No one knew what to do," said Jerry Assa. "A soccer ball appeared, candles and people gathered to remember him. He was a happy young man, and brought many different types of friends together, and they often asked

his advice. My wife, Sandy, and I are proud of the memorial that celebrates Brian's life."

The site grew to include many messages: "Rest In Peace" and "Never Forgotten" drawn on the Seaford Oyster Bay Expressway sidewalk. "His friends were devastated when state highway officials painted over the messages, saying it was graffiti. There would be an uproar if they took the memorial down," said Vanessa Assa, who reminds people to stand back off the road when visiting. "It's not a place to drink or hang out. It's where anyone can take a moment out of their lives to reflect, remember him and reminisce about good memories." In early November, 40 friends gathered behind the guardrail under the Long Island Expressway overpass on Route 231 (Deer Park Road) in Dix Hills to remember 22-year-old Chris Regula of North Babylon. Regula was killed on June 13 when his Honda motorcycle collided with a 2000 Bering dump truck. "He just bought his bike like a month before and was going to work at 7:04 in the morning," said a good friend and fellow mechanic at Huntington Honda, Darren Millar, 23, of Bay Shore.

"I came here a lot in the beginning. You know, it's like, this is where it happened," Millar said "But St. Charles Cemetery is where he is now. So, I've been going to visit him there more, but it closes at 5 at night."

With no room to stop along the shoulder but up a cement walkway, flowers and cards continually reappear on the railings. Friends mentioned that Regula's sister Catherine takes care of the site.

Girlfriend Christina O'Halleran, 25, said, "The police check out what's going on, but once they understand why we're here, they leave us alone and kind of watch over us."

As time goes by, visits begin to fade. "We'd come once a week during the summer," said longtime friend, Jason Sellick, 23, of West Babylon. "But, I don't come here as often anymore. He'll never be forgotten."

Off-site memorials

The Long Island Chapter of MADD created the Garden of Awareness with a Wall of Remembrance memorial site at Farmingdale State College to honor victims of drunken driving at one central, safe location. At 12:30 p.m. next Sunday, in Roosevelt Hall, MADD will hold its 27th annual candlelight vigil in remembrance.

After learning that states such as Texas and West Virginia have legally banned roadside memorials, 37-year-old Jennifer Jacobs of Saginaw Township in Michigan created a Web site, thecrossbythesideoftheroad.com. It provides a virtual memorial meeting place for those who grieve to pay tribute to their lost loved one.

The Assa family wants Brian's memorial to serve as a warning for onlookers and teens. The Assas created the Think First Foundation (thinkfirstfoundation.org) and are working with SADD, which changed its name in 1997 to Students Against Destructive Decisions.

Syosset resident Bridget Boye, 45, does not know the Assa family, but said of his memorial, "When I drive by, I slow down and can't help but feel sorry for the friends and family. It's a parent's worst nightmare."

A World Day of Remembrance for Road Traffic Victims has been observed since 1993 in various countries around the world, and in 2005, the United Nations endorsed marking in on the third Sunday of every November.

According to the World Health Organization, road crashes kill nearly 1.3 million people a year worldwide and are the No. 1 cause of death for children ages 10 to 24. As of Sept. 30, there were 56 vehicular deaths in Nassau County and 125 in Suffolk County.

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