

# Schools need to deal with reality of death

By Barbara Ann Homick  
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Even though the death of a student can shock a school community, it is important for students and school officials to prepare for such a tragedy, according to Gerry Pashby.

Pashby, the primary therapist and director of social work at the DePaul Mental Health Clinic, is also a counselor at three diocesan high schools — McQuaid Jesuit, Bishop Kearney and the Aquinas Institute. In addition to working in psychiatric social work at DePaul for the past 30 years, Pashby said he has had to deal with several student deaths during the past few years.

One of the recent deaths was that of Bishop Kearney senior Paul Blake. The 17-year-old Blake was involved in a car accident on Halloween night of 1989, after taking his younger siblings trick-or-treating. On the way home, he lost control of his car and was hit broadside by an oncoming truck. He immediately went into a coma.

Since the next day was the feast of All Saints, the Bishop Kearney students attended Mass. During the service, they were informed of the accident and they prayed that Paul Blake would get better. Later that day, however, Blake died of the injuries he suffered in the crash.

When the students were notified of Blake's death, they immediately went to the school's chapel to say prayers. A memorial service was held at the school, and the entire senior class attended the funeral.

Ginny Kennedy-Tette, campus minister at Bishop Kearney, said that the faculty had to be strong for the students during the crisis.

"The students look to the adults for comfort, which we can give," she said. "But they have to realize that we can't give them all the answers."

Sister Evelyn Breslin, SSND, assistant principal at Bishop Kearney, noted that it is vital for students' needs to be met during the time of the crisis. She added that

Bishop Kearney faculty gave special privileges to students during the intense grieving period.

"They could leave class if they couldn't deal with it," Sister Breslin said. "We just worked through it together."

When Stan Hokula — a former Cardinal Mooney student who had transferred to Greece Olympia High School — died of an apparent suicide in the spring of 1990, other former Mooney students and faculty members were deeply affected, according to Tette. Many students and teachers of the former Catholic high school were at Kearney when news of Hokula's death broke.

"The most important thing was to confirm the situation because there were so many rumors going around," said Barbara Jablonski, director of development and public relations at Kearney.

The former Mooney faculty and students were called to the cafeteria for a prayer service, and many of the seniors attended the funeral.

"Even though it wasn't our student, we were definitely affected," Jablonski said. "It's important to offer support, and the support should be visible."

Ralph Klicker, founder of the Buffalo, N.Y.-based Thanos Institute — a continuing education organization dealing with death and grief — also suggests a support network for students.

In a teleconference sponsored by the Thanos Institute and broadcast at Monroe Community College on Nov. 9, Klicker stressed the importance of a crisis plan that would help students and faculty deal better with the situation while under pressure.

Klicker developed a 19-step plan to make things run more smoothly during the crisis period. The model plan includes a telephone network to notify faculty of the death as soon as possible, a crisis center or designated counseling room for students, a policy on attending funerals, and a letter for students to take home to their parents, among other ideas.

Pashby, a parishioner of St. Helen's in

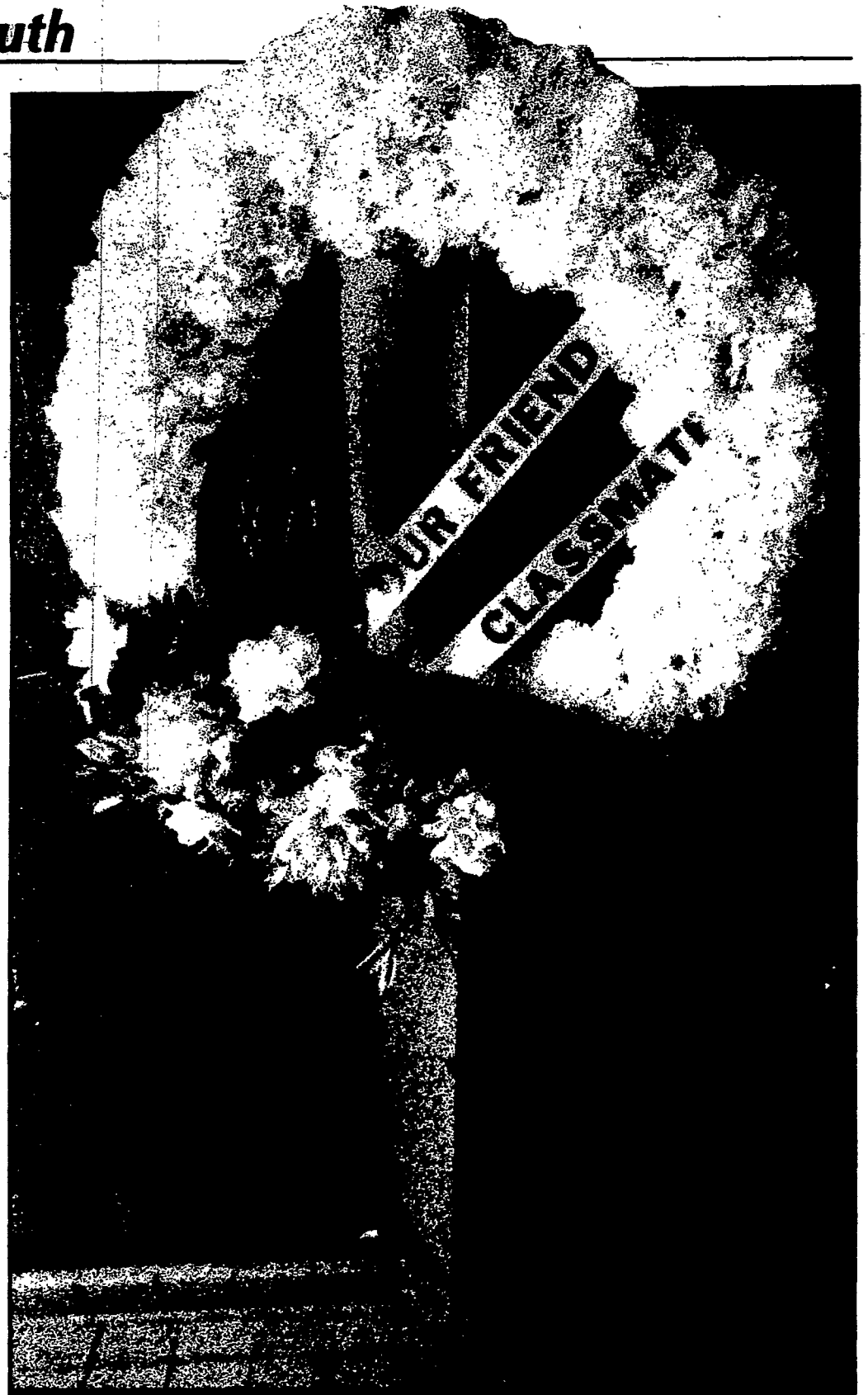


Photo illustration by Babette G. Augustin

Gates, said that officials of Bishop Kearney handled both death situations very well. Although some students needed counseling after Blake's death, most found comfort in their teachers and friends. "The faculty really pitched in when the kids needed them the most."

He said that the Catholic schools appropriately respond to a tragedy with religion, but depending on what signals he picks up from the student, Pashby said he may have to go beyond religious beliefs to help.

"Sometimes a student doesn't even know the person who died," Pashby said, "but the death may open up previous losses, such as the death of a relative or the loss of a parent through divorce."

Students may notice physical signs of their grief after the death of a friend, Pashby said. For instance, they may experience restlessness, sleep disturbances, headaches, lack of attention spans and a tendency to steer away from social events.

Pashby urges teachers and parents to help students maintain a sense of structure in their lives by continuing to assign homework and household chores. He added that students should try to continue their normal routine.

One of the worst things a school can do is dismiss the students early, Pashby said. "The students shouldn't be allowed to go off on their own. There is so much that can be done in the schools at a time like this,

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