

Victim is a tragic poster child for DUI

In death, Shelly Haensel has gained a measure of fame that she never enjoyed in life. In time, it might exceed the infamy of her killer.

That's because the spectral image of Haensel's face was posted recently on a billboard along South Causeway Boulevard in Old Jefferson. For passing motorists, it memorializes the teeth-baring enthusiasm of a 25-year-old Metairie woman who had quit college just short of graduation to take care of her cancer-stricken grandfather. After he succumbed in 1994, she returned to college, hoping to complete an education that had begun at St. Pius X School and Mount Carmel Academy in New Orleans.

Haensel was a dancer, a cheerleader and a singer, an accomplished swimmer, lifeguard and swim instructor.

But no amount of swimming and lifeguarding could save her in the early morning hours of Feb. 17, 1995, when a drunken driver's car carried her into Bayou St. John.

Haensel and Christopher Nabors had met about two weeks earlier. He was 30, a Louisiana State University medical student training in oral surgery at Charity Hospital.

They left a Mid-City bar in his flashy Eagle Talon sports car, probably bound for her home. He ran the stop sign at Friederichs Street and Wisner Boulevard. The car jumped the curb, clipped a tree and plunged into the



DREW BROACH

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bayou.

Nabors' condition has been dutifully chronicled in these pages before. A raging alcoholic, he was blind drunk at the time of the wreck, having been guzzling beer and shots of hard liquor for hours before getting behind the wheel with Haensel in the passenger seat.

His reaction to the accident that night has also been well documented. Nabors saved himself by climbing out of the Talon's sun roof, leaving Haensel strapped in her seat to drown. When questioned initially about what happened, court testimony indicated he fretted over his career, his car and the wreck's effect on his insurance premiums. As for his passenger, he said, "I don't even know the bitch's name. I just picked her up in a bar." Some time later, he bought a new vehicle, a pickup truck with "Splash" decals on the side doors and tailgate.

The police did their job, booking Nabors with vehicular homicide even though his blood-alcohol test at Charity Hospital — a test that some considered suspect because Nabors' co-workers there pumped innocent fluids into his system before the sample was drawn — showed him sober under the law.

The prosecutors did their job, presenting a strong enough case to win a jury conviction.

And the judge did his job, sentencing Nabors to the maximum 15 years in prison. By that time, Nabors had

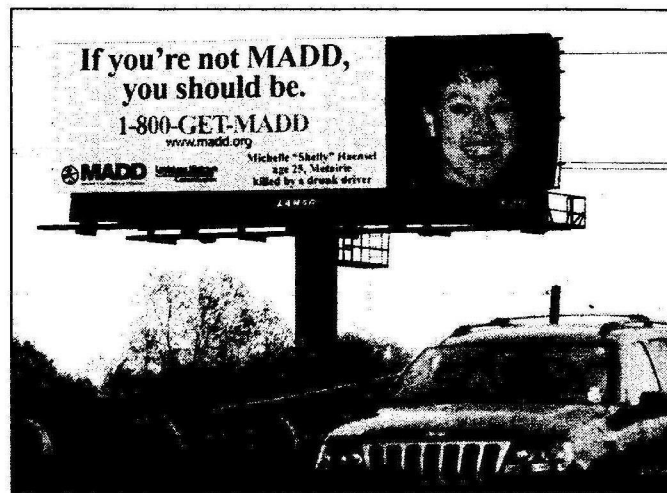
wised up, begging through tears as he told the court, "I was an idiot. It's my fault. I am completely responsible."

Nabors served half his sentence and was released a year ago from the Washington Correctional Institute at Angie, standard procedure for a prisoner with good behavior in the slammer. He returned to his parents' home in Pittsburgh, where he remains on parole until 2010. He did not return a telephone call for comment this week.

Haensel's parents sued the state over what happened to Nabors at Charity Hospital after the wreck, charging that hospital staffers prevented cops from getting an accurate blood-alcohol reading. They lost and now are appealing.

But they also have channeled their emotions and their energy into education. Sandra "Cookie" Haensel has become a victims advocate for Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Indeed, the billboard bearing her daughter's smiling face is sponsored by MADD and the Louisiana Highway Safety Commission.

Not all drunken drivers are as callous as Christopher Nabors was on the



STAFF PHOTO BY DONALD STOUT

A MADD billboard on Causeway Boulevard shows carries a picture of Shelly Haensel.

morning of Feb. 17, 1995. Most are just stupid. But there are a lot of them out there, so many that 47 percent of the traffic deaths in Louisiana are blamed on alcohol. The national average is 41 percent.

Haensel's father, Bill Haensel, said education might be the best thing to come out of his daughter's death.

"It's like murder: You're never going to stop it, but if you quit talking about it, you're not going to reduce it," he said.

Beside Shelly Haensel's picture on the billboard is this message: "If you're not MADD, you should be." MADD's telephone number is (800) 438-6233.

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Drew Broach is the East Jefferson bureau chief. He can be reached at dbroach@timespicayune.com or (504) 883-7059.