

Site of fatal crash marked by flowers

By JAMES VARNEY
Staff writer

A skid, a terrifying moment of flight and a splash in the frigid waters of Bayou St. John last week marked the last moments of Michelle Haensel's life.

Haensel, 25, drowned early Friday morning after the car she was riding in spun out of control on Wisner Boulevard during a thunderstorm. The car clipped a tree, soared into the bayou and sank.

Yet as quickly as Haensel vanished, memorials for her appeared. The next day, a smear of color accompanied the yellow police tape stretched across the crash site. People touched by the Metairie woman's death started leaving flowers, and now her memory is in full bloom.

Four arrangements on easels, as well as cut flowers on the ground and heart-shaped wreaths, line the grassy shoulder.

"This should have never happened," said Haensel's mother, Cookie Roth Haensel. But she hopes the flowers serve as a kind of guardrail, as well as a memorial.

"If it just helps one person not make the same mistake, that would have been Shelly's goal," she said.

The cause of the accident remains under investigation, and

officers handling the case could not be reached for comment Wednesday. The driver of the car, Christopher Nabors, 30, survived and has been booked with vehicular homicide.

Shelly, as her parents and sisters called her, lived at home and had only been late on a Thursday night once before last week's fatal crash, her mother said.

Cookie Roth Haensel wept as she spoke about her daughter, who had wanted to pursue a career in either journalism or law after completing her studies at the University of New Orleans.

"She was a very caring, giving person," she said. "I'm not trying to make her a saint, but she was not your normal 25-year-old."

In 1994, Michelle Haensel left Nicholls State University, where she was 9 credit hours short of a bachelor's degree, and headed home to take care of her grandfather, Joe Roth, who was dying of cancer.

At first, her mother said she was against her daughter giving up her goals to help her grandfather, but Shelly would hear none of it. Roth died last March.

"After her grandfather passed away, she continued to either visit or call her grandmother each day," her family wrote in an homily delivered at her funeral.

"She was just a wonderful person," her father, Bill Haensel, said.



Flowers on Wisner Boulevard pay tribute to Michelle Haensel the spot where the car she was riding in left the road and plunged into Bayou St. John, killing her last week.

STAFF PHOTO BY MAGDALENA Z