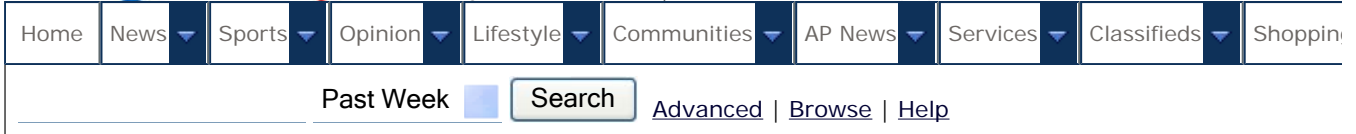




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SFHS students deal with trio of deaths

By Sara McDonald

The Daily News

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The reminders come in slow and painful doses, every day: the empty desk in class, the jersey number no one will wear again, the missing face in the crowd.

When a classmate dies, the event can throw teenagers off course, leaving them confused and fearful.

When it happens three times in one year, it can be numbing.

Santa Fe High School knows that all too well.

The school was shocked and shaken in March when beloved student athlete Kyle Adams died in a one-car accident on state Highway 6.

Classmates saw him in school on Friday and watched him play baseball that night. Then, he was gone.

The community gradually healed, but his memory lingered during football games for teammates and spectators alike.

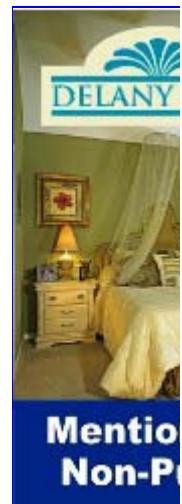
Then, another tragedy hit.

Sophomore Catherine Biela, a petite, pretty girl voted a class favorite when she was a freshman, died Nov. 19.

She went out on a Saturday night with three other students, but the night ended with all of them except her hospitalized after another one-car accident.



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She died at the scene.

Then, last week, the one death that students expected, but still weren't quite prepared for, came.

Chelsey Campbell, a softball player and cheerleader, died after battling cancer for more than a year.

"It's almost like people are getting used to it," senior Jake Bigford said. "It makes me think, 'I've got to be real careful.' It's almost like, 'Who's next?'"

It's common for multiple deaths to have a numbing effect, said bereavement expert Dr. Thomas Frantz, a counseling and psychology professor at the University of Buffalo.

"As a teenager, grief hits you in such a deep, emotional way," he said. "You're just beginning to see things like an adult, but everything is newer. It's all a little overwhelming."

When multiple deaths occur, the pain threshold is already full with the first death.

And some students realize that.

Sophomore Russel Almack, a friend of Biela's, said he thought her death was ignored to the more visible loss of Adams.

"It was like nothing happened," he said. "It made me mad. It just makes dealing with it all that worse."

Still, many teens, such as Bigford, start wondering who will die next.

It's a cry for security, Frantz said. When a classmate dies, students must face the fact that they aren't invincible.

"No one expects someone in class to die," Frantz said. "That's what makes it different from someone like a great-aunt. It throws off your world view and suddenly makes you question everything you took for granted."

Security is often the best thing parents can provide for their children during those times, Frantz said.

"If dad goes on a business trip for a long time, even if the relationship with dad isn't that good, it can trigger more pain," Frantz said. "To them, the world isn't as safe as it used to be."

And though not all students will eagerly talk about it, more than likely all of them need to.

Parents should look for opportunities to talk about the deaths to help their children heal, Frantz said.

They should also keep in mind that teenagers do so differently than adults.

When teenagers are coping with a loss, they often express it in more tangible ways than other age groups.

Letters, signs and makeshift memorials are all common, Frantz said.

In that respect, Santa Fe students are dealing with the losses.

Along state Highway 6, the tree that Adams struck has become a shrine. A homecoming mum, balloons deflated long ago and his Gatorade bottle from after-school practice lie around the trunk.

On the grassy side of Avenue L where Biela died, crosses, flowers and a cowboy hat rest next to the culvert the car hit.

And Campbell's memorial was the student body, from macho athletes to dainty cheerleaders like her, wearing pink to her funeral at her request.

In the high school parking lot, shoe-polish words memorialize each of them.

On Forrest Garner's backpack straps, there are Adams' initials and jersey number.

Dealing with the deaths has been difficult for everyone, including the Rev. Clay Atchley, youth minister at Arcadia Christian Church. Atchley spoke at Biela's funeral, one of the most difficult things he said he's ever done.

But he reminded the students that their hearts would be restored with time.

"Everybody has two major reactions when something like this happens: loss and hopelessness," he said. "That sense of loss will never go away. There will always be a hole for that person. Hope can be restored."

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