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Death shall not dim the light of a remarkable young man

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P-I COLUMNIST

At least this much will be about Robert Vasen's short, luminous life.

This will be about the way he filled it with a keen and genuine interest in everyone he met. And about the gaping crater that remains now that he inexplicably is gone.

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Susan Paynter takes on the week's news Friday mornings 10-11 on KUOW-FM (94.9).

It will not be about the young drunken driver set to be sentenced today for the March crash that took Robert away. I won't even mention his name.

It won't be about the driver's guilty plea, the length of his sentence, the coordinates of a Bellevue intersection, the blood alcohol level, a speeding Jeep or the blur of a stop sign.

Robert's aching family is frankly sick of reading so much of that but so little about what was lost just three weeks shy of Robert's 21st birthday, with so much promise within reach of his typically outstretched hand.

From childhood he was a boy without borders. He had an almost strange capacity to connect with everyone he knew or extended himself to meet -- little kids, cousins, strange cab drivers, elders. Every week he had a lunch date with his 89-year-old grandmother.

On a one-day stop in New York on his way to study in Spain last year, Robert struck up an acquaintance with his Russian cab driver, and the driver ended up buying Robert dinner from his favorite deli on the way to the airport.

They spread their sandwiches on the trunk and just talked.

So it wasn't really so surprising that, after word spread of Robert's death, people "came out of the woodwork," according to his brother, David.

The folks who fed him tacos and burritos at Bellevue's Casa D's sent a beautiful card.

The people at Chase's Pancake Corral sent a card and a donation.

One locker-room attendant at the Bellevue Club where he worked out had to take the day off the day Robert died. And another cried with Robert's father, later asking if it was OK to go to his grave.

News reports about the crash said that, besides Robert, 10 others were injured. But, in truth, it was so many more.

For instance, his friends' parents who always relished their own talks with Robert because, to him, they were interesting people, not parental furniture.

Or the kid Robert rescued from bullies in the fourth grade who never forgot. Never mind that Robert -- a "late bloomer" -- was, himself, one of the smallest kids in the class.

Or the nurse who tended him at Children's Hospital when, as a kid, he nearly lost a leg to a staph infection. Years later, Robert tracked her down to express his thanks.

Two of his friends sped home from their own studies in Europe hoping to say goodbye before Robert died two months ago at Harborview Medical Center. Despite the academic detour, they just couldn't bring themselves to go back. "Their lives changed," Robert's mother Evy, told me. "They had done everything together -- sports, weekend overnights, school dances -- ever since they met. It's just such a shock to them that someone like Robert could really be lost."

Then, of course, there are Robert's parents, Daniel and Evy, 27-year-old sister Jackie, and David, 25, the big brother and Stanford University grad Robert looked up to. Their parents were in San Francisco with David celebrating his birthday when the inconceivable call came. Jackie was the first one to the hospital.

Robert's mom says he was so proud of his sister, who soon will graduate from the University of Washington's Medical School. "On the last day of classes last Friday all I wanted to do was go home and celebrate by telling Robert all about it," Jackie said.

"He had come out with me and my friends recently when we celebrated my last birthday. He just connected with everyone, regardless of age."

Next it would have been Robert's turn when he turned 21. After that it was to be Jackie's wedding. "We were to be married next weekend but have postponed," she said.

And there were the shining possibilities ahead for Robert and Holly, the girlfriend he met six months earlier in Spain. At his funeral she read a letter Robert had written to her about what, to him, was the meaning of life.

And, finally, there was Robert's own future, which held a summer internship followed by a final year at the UW. He hoped to combine his knack for business with a consuming interest in helping people of different cultures. Robert, whose mother is from Brazil and father is from Chile, was a first-generation American. Like the new kids he reached out to in high school, making sure they had rides to the games, he wanted to help "outsiders" find their way in.

"We're still getting letters from kids we didn't even know that he helped," Robert's mother said.

So, though 400 people were expected at Robert's funeral at Bellevue's Temple B'Nai Torah, it really wasn't so surprising when more than 1,200 showed up, standing nearly two hours outside of opened doors to hear what they could of the service.

Neither is it surprising that Children's Hospital and Medical Center, where Robert volunteered, has received an outpouring of donations. An endowment in his name to help hurting children is halfway to its goal.

The people who loved Robert know that news stories again will carry the empty details of that intersection, that driver, his sentence, and Robert's death. But only one thing really matters, and that's the fullness of the way he lived the 20 years, 11 months and one week of his life.

HOW TO HELP

You can donate at the Children's Hospital Foundation / Robert Vasen Memorial Fund, P.O. Box 50020, Seattle, WA 98145 or go to waystohelp.seattlechildrens.org/donations/ and follow prompts, designating gift is to Robert Vasen Memorial Fund.

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