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Robert Vasen, 1985-2006: Crash victim recalled as athlete, student, friend

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P-I REPORTER

BELLEVUE -- Robert Vasen had an impromptu lunch date Saturday.

His friend Jeff Dicks was going to visit his grandmother. Vasen joined them. Her eyes lit up as soon as she saw him.

"She just said, 'Oh Robert,' " Dicks said.

Grandmothers loved Robert. Then again, so did everyone else, which is why the accident that occurred on Saturday night is leaving such a scar. Vasen was fatally injured when the BMW he was riding in was rammed by a Jeep Cherokee in Bellevue on Saturday night in an accident that involved 11 people, all in their 20s or younger.

Vasen, 20, was an athlete who didn't let a serious knee injury stop him from playing sports. He was a student who surprised his high school science teacher with a certificate of preservation for 15 acres of forest in Brazil. And he was a friend who stayed up late to help fellow student Matt Razore finish a last-minute homework project at Bellevue High School.

It was a Thursday night, and the assignment of a world brochure was due Friday. Razore spent the night at Vasen's house, and they stayed up late pasting it together.

"It was the first 'A' I got in that class," recalled Razore, who graduated the year after Vasen.

Razore and 14 other friends of Vasen's met in a Bellevue living room on Tuesday afternoon. Mac Martin had flown back from France. Matt Coombs came back from college in Connecticut, John Marcus Pinard from Massachusetts. Razore and Leo Gontmakher came home from Arizona.

Most graduated from Bellevue High alongside Vasen in 2003. All were close friends, greeting one another with hugs and sharing their memories of Vasen.

Such as the time Vasen was the coxswain for a crew team in ninth grade and steered their boat to the Lake Union dock with a Union 76 gas pump as if they need to fill up. Or when a Seahawk cheerleader offered to show him around the University of Washington campus and he was too embarrassed to accept.

Not to say Vasen was perfect. He was willing to cheat at cards.

Vasen was enrolled at the University of Washington, where he was studying economics. He had an unpaid internship at Virginia Mason last summer. His friends laughed as they remembered his charm and charisma, and they marveled at his character.

"I really believe the word that most embodies Robert was 'genuine,'" said Adam Hay, a friend who flew back from Florence, Italy, for Vasen's memorial. "When he listened, it wasn't because he had to. It was because he wanted to."

Memorial services for Vasen will be held today at Temple B'nai Torah in Bellevue.

At the time of the accident, he was with four friends, all in their 20s. The BMW they were riding in was struck by the Jeep at the intersection of 108th Avenue Northeast and Northeast Second Street. Passengers in the BMW have said the Jeep's driver ran a red light.

The driver of the Jeep is in his early 20s. He remains under arrest, and police are investigating whether to charge him with vehicular homicide. Bail was set at \$350,000. The driver of the BMW has not been charged.

Vasen's father, Danny, is from Chile and his mother, Evy, is from Brazil. He has an older brother and sister.

His maternal grandmother escaped from Nazi Germany, and when Robert was in the fourth grade, he wrote the story of her escape down to the detail that she hid diamonds in the heels of shoes to keep the Nazis from taking them.

Susan La Rosa was Vasen's counselor at Bellevue High School -- or, as she said it, "I was lucky to be his counselor."

"Robert was the kind of kid that made a teacher feel important," La Rosa said. "He would do just really kind things. He would bring you a cup of coffee. He would bring you candy."

Vasen was an elite-level soccer player up until junior high. He suffered a staph infection that required multiple operations. The flexibility and strength was limited in his leg, which required extensive physical therapy.

"He never complained," said Dicks, who is 21.

And Vasen never stopped trying. He played soccer in high school, and as a senior, he sought to make the basketball team after being cut as a sophomore and a junior. He was initially going to be cut again his senior year, but coach Bob McDonald eventually reconsidered.

"He just had that something, that intangible," said McDonald, Bellevue's interim coach that season. "You don't know who has it, but he had it. To do whatever it took to meet his goal."

When Bellevue played Sammamish in the KingCo conference tournament, the Wolverines were down by 14 with about four minutes to go, and Vasen was substituted into the game.

He had a steal or two. He made one layup and perhaps more. Three years later, the details

aren't as important as the outcome. Bellevue won in overtime.

"He definitely turned that game around," Dicks said.

Not that anyone needed an additional reason to root for Vasen.

"He always had the biggest cheering section," Razore said.

That was true for Vasen well beyond the basketball court.

SERVICE TODAY

A memorial service for Robert Vasen is planned for 5 p.m. today at Temple B'nai Torah, 15727 N.E. Fourth St., Bellevue.

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