

December 26, 2002 • The Cincinnati Enquirer

## **Teens' deaths a blow to schools**

*By Cindy Kranz*

### **At St. Ursula, prayer and counseling help to heal**

Editor's note: This is the first of a two-part series examining the impact of fatal car accidents this year involving teen drivers in the Tri-state.

Through their grief, seniors at St. Ursula Academy have matured beyond their years.

Two deaths in the family have a way of doing that.

In 2002, St. Ursula lost two members of the Class of 2003 - Julia Schmidt and Makena "Kenzie" Comisar - in separate traffic accidents. The deaths have left a void at this all-girls Catholic school of 689 students in East Walnut Hills.

"It has changed our class dramatically," said Anne Schuermann, an 18-year-old senior from Montgomery. "There's a sense of just incredible strength I see in everyone around us and incredible love."

The grieving is far from over. Any student having a bad day is encouraged to talk with teachers or counselors.

"It's not business as usual," said Fran Romweber, who in her seven years as principal has never had to deal with such tragedies. "It's ongoing. We give lots of hugs and support."

That support is now being extended to a rival school in Blue Ash.

When Mallory Naab, a junior at Ursuline Academy, was killed Nov. 30 in a two-car crash near Hamilton, the pain rippled 14 miles away at St. Ursula. If anyone understands what Ursuline is going through, it's St. Ursula.

Mrs. Romweber called with condolences and sent a copy of the log of steps her school had taken after the deaths of Julia and Kenzie. Ursuline Principal Sharon Redmond said it was reassuring to know that Ursuline was doing some of the same things that St. Ursula had done.

"Their students sent us a huge card that they signed and wrote notes to our students, which was very sweet," Ms. Redmond said.

Since Jan. 1, 13 Tristate teen-agers (age 16-17) have died in traffic accidents involving teen drivers. One of them, 16-year-old Jessica Carson of Springdale, was killed Nov. 5 when she and a Princeton High School classmate crashed on I-275. Some Ursula students knew Jessica from participating with her in theater productions at St. Xavier High School.

When a student dies, schools are on the front lines in dealing with the grief of friends left behind. At St. Ursula, the grief started with Julia Schmidt's death Jan. 18.

Julia, 16, of Westwood, was a passenger in a classmate's car when the driver lost control and crashed into a utility pole in Anderson Township. The driver was found guilty of aggravated vehicular manslaughter and sentenced to two weeks in detention, 35 hours of community service and probation.

Julia, a lacrosse player, was the first St. Ursula student to die in a traffic accident since 1982.

Kenzie Comisar, 17, a tennis player from Hyde Park, was killed Aug. 1 in a one-car accident in Miami Township, Clermont County. Her tires dropped onto the shoulder, and she overcorrected, flipping the car and hitting a telephone pole. Excessive speed, drugs and alcohol were all ruled out as a cause.

"I thought it was so surreal the second time," Anne said. "It was like reliving the same nightmare."

The school held prayer services for both girls within 24 hours of their deaths.

Julia's service was difficult enough, but when Kenzie died, senior religion teacher Sara Lanham said the grief was overwhelming. She sensed increased anger among the 169 seniors.

"Why did this happen to our class again?" was a question she heard often.

Students signed posters for the Schmidt family and a wreath with ribbons for the Comisars. A religion class made prayer cards that have been bound in books for Julia's and Kenzie's families.

In September 2001, the guidance department started a pilot program in which the school enlisted a panel of providers for student services. They are licensed professionals, specializing in school psychology, grief and bereavement, trauma, family issues and chemical dependency, who can be called to help anytime.

Little did school officials know how much that help would be needed four months later.

St. Ursula also pinpointed which students would be affected most, keeping a close eye on best friends, fellow athletes and students who had lost a loved one.

After Kenzie's death, St. Ursula called in Fernside Center for Grieving Children to help. Fernside staffers met with parents, held a student meeting and then met with small groups of students who were most affected.

"It's an overwhelming feeling of vulnerability - 'It could have been me. It could have been my best friend,' " said Christi Kettman, Fernside's outreach coordinator. "They were questioning their own mortality, questioning the importance of daily life, finding meaning in daily life, as well as the future."

One of the students most affected by the deaths is Morgan Lee, a 17-year-old senior who was friends with Julia and best friends with Kenzie. Kenzie was on the way to Morgan's house when the accident happened. When she didn't show up, Morgan went looking for her and came upon the accident.

"It's traumatized the girls in that school," said Morgan's mother, Pamela Boynton of Loveland. "It's been hard for them to focus. They're very fortunate to be in a school that accommodated their need to grieve and has nurtured them."

Morgan has been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. One of her symptoms is trouble concentrating.

"Every teacher my daughter has had either has called me or written me about Morgan's progress and her feelings," Mrs. Boynton said.

"The school also adjusted Morgan's schedule so she could add two religion classes, both of which have helped her to process her grief," Ms. Boynton said.

Ms. Lanham has struggled while teaching religion classes, where discussions of life, death and the afterlife are the norm.

"I always felt nervous that I was doing more harm than good in allowing the conversation to continue in those realms. But in approaching students after class, I have followed their lead," she said.

"One student used the analogy of hiking up a mountain with a blister on your foot. It hurts the whole time, but you know when you get to the top of the mountain, it's going to be a great view."

"The students take life and everything about it more seriously now," Ms. Boynton said.

"They realize how precious life is and how quickly it can be taken away," she said.

"(St. Ursula) has always been very high energy with happy and well-adjusted girls. Yet, there's a seriousness about them now, including Morgan and all her friends, that says they understand more about how fragile life is, and how every decision has

consequences.”

“The girls also take their responsibility as young drivers more seriously,” said Ms. Boynton, who is responsible for bringing teen driving clinics to Cincinnati, along with her husband and the Comisars.

“My daughter requests to drive places a lot less. I know a lot of parents at St. Ursula have cut way back on social driving as a result of this, set more limits about curfew and driving in bad weather. I think, frankly, we’ve all been too liberal with that for young drivers.”

Senior Emily Aicklen of Terrace Park, 17, a close friend of Kenzie, said she is more cautious now.

“(Before) I would have been embarrassed to tell someone to ‘slow down.’ Now, it’s just a reflex,” said Emily, who didn’t drive for a month after Kenzie’s accident.

### **A life lesson**

“Although the girls have been distracted from their studies, they have learned more this year than they’ll find in any textbook,” Mrs. Romweber said.

And they continue to work through their grief.

Art students and friends of Julia and Kenzie are decorating a large urn as a memorial.

The students collected photos, poems, souvenirs and other objects to place on the urn, which will be planted with seasonal flowers.

Students and staff are planning a prayer service at school to mark the anniversary of Kenzie’s death.

“It’s that sense of community that kept the school glued together during this devastating time,” Mrs. Romweber said.

“The spirituality of the school is a focal point in the healing process,” she said.

“Life is just a journey, but there is love here to be a supportive force for us.”

“St. Ursula students can openly turn to God,” Mrs. Romweber said.