



Breaking The Cycle

## HS mourns student, 17

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Students at Sachem High School North yesterday were mourning the loss of a 17-year-old junior killed while crossing a busy intersection with her boyfriend.

Nikoletta Joannides of Holbrook was hit by a car Monday night as she and her boyfriend walked east across Patchogue-Holbrook Road at the Long Island Expressway's eastbound service road.

The teens were rushed by ambulance to University Hospital in Stony Brook, where Joannides died shortly after the 8:30 p.m. accident. Her boyfriend, Robert Eifert, also 17 and from Holbrook, suffered minor injuries, police said.

Thomas Heckman, 48, of Holbrook, the driver of the 1996 Pontiac sedan that struck the teens, had the right of way as he headed northbound on Patchogue-Holbrook Road, cops said.

"The light was green" for the driver, said a police investigator. "It appears they might have been crossing against the light."

Sachem dispatched a crisis response team of school psychologists and other trained staff to counsel grieving classmates and teachers.

James Nolan, principal of Sachem High School North, said Eifert was apparently walking Joannides home from his house when they were hit.

"It's every mom and dad's nightmare. What's worse than losing a child?" Nolan said.

Nolan said students and teachers were "very emotional" over the death of Joannides, whom he described as a "very, very well-liked student, an unassuming, humble young lady."

He said she displayed a caring, maternal side toward other classmates that was unusual for a teen.

"One teacher who knew her said she had motherly instincts. When a new student arrived, she took this person under her wing and she made sure that he had friends," Nolan said.

Coincidentally, a guest speaker at the school who had been scheduled to address students before the accident helped comfort them yesterday.

Detective Steven McDonald, a former New York City cop who was left paralyzed from a shooting, visited Sachem, as he does other schools, to speak about forgiveness and faith.

McDonald was shot in the head and spine in 1986 by a bicycle thief in Central Park. He publicly forgave the shooter.

"His message was the power of love, how that can get us through the most difficult times," Nolan said of McDonald, who breathes through a respirator and operates his wheelchair by blowing into tubes.

"I think to some degree, it helped the students deal with the tragedy at hand."

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