

*In Loving Memory of
Matthew Nicholas Hernandez*

Matthew Nicholas Hernandez passed away on December 20th 2006 due to a car accident. The Los Angeles Times Article is attached below. He was employed with us here at the Office of Councilmember Ed Reyes, as an intern who specialized in working on issues related to the L.A. River. He was particularly instrumental in organizing the First Youth Conference on the L.A. River which took place this past October. Matthew was a highly intelligent, perceptive, and diligent worker who got along with everyone at our office. It is truly unfortunate to see a promising and aspiring youth such as Matthew leave us. We offer our condolences to the close friends and relatives of him, he will truly be missed.

http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-fatal21dec21_0,7965452.story?coll=la-home-local

Fiery crash kills 3 teenagers

The youths die early Wednesday after the driver veers off Los Feliz Boulevard and strikes a tree near Griffith Park. Two passengers pulled from the vehicle survive.

By Angie Green and Amanda Covarrubias
Times Staff Writers

December 21, 2006

The five teenagers were described by friends as close and fun-loving. They had gathered Tuesday night to celebrate a birthday party for one of the boys.

But what should have been a happy occasion for the youths and their families soon turned tragic.

After leaving the party, the five teens piled into a Nissan Maxima and headed east on Los Feliz Boulevard near Griffith Park. About 1 a.m., the driver, Matthew Nicholas Hernandez, lost control of the speeding car as he attempted to swerve around a slower-moving vehicle, police said.

The Nissan veered off the road and struck a tree, bursting into flames, trapping Hernandez and his front-seat passenger, Matthew Merrill, both 18, inside. Both died at the scene.

Neighbors, awakened by the explosion and screams, raced to the scene with buckets of water and garden hoses to try to put out the blaze. They pulled three youths from the back seat of the car before the vehicle became fully engulfed.

Another passenger, Sean Paul Balaney, 18, of Glendale, was able to talk to neighbors who helped him out of the vehicle, but died at the scene a short time later, witnesses said. The two survivors were identified as Stephen Castillo, 14, and Kyle Merrill, Matthew's younger brother, who had just celebrated his 15th birthday.

Ramon Merrill, the boys' father, who was following in another car with his daughter, Nikki, ran to the burning car to try and free his elder son, witnesses said. He had to be restrained by firefighters.

Wayne Matewsky, who was among those who rushed to the scene, said he continued spraying water on the burning car after the accident as Nikki Merrill kept screaming, "Don't let my brother die!"

"It was a nightmare," Matewsky said. "What a terrible night, that poor family."

The accident is under investigation. Police said the Nissan was moving "at a high rate of speed" at the time of the accident, but they had not determined the speed as of Wednesday. The posted speed limit is 35 mph.

Balaney was the only one of the five who was not wearing a seat belt, said Sgt. Michael Johnson of the Los Angeles Police Department.

"It is highly possible that if he was wearing a seat belt he would have survived," Johnson said. The two surviving victims were being treated for serious injuries at local hospitals.

Four of the five victims were students or former students at Cathedral High School, an all-boys parochial school near downtown Los Angeles.

Hernandez was student body president, and Matthew Merrill was named most valuable pitcher in the Camino Real League before they graduated last spring.

"We have spoken with the families and they're doing the best they can," said Brother John Montgomery, the school's principal. "We're assuring them of our prayers and support."

He described Hernandez, of Fontana, and Merrill, of Cypress Park, as popular school leaders and athletes.

"They were very fun-loving students that took a lot of pride in their achievements here at school," he said. "These were kids that strove not only to benefit their campus by being active in student government and sports, but they demonstrated their leadership on campus every day by being good students in the classroom and on the field."

Hernandez, one of five brothers, was enrolled at Cal State Los Angeles and worked as an intern for Los Angeles City Councilman Ed Reyes.

At the conclusion of Wednesday's City Council meeting, a tearful Reyes delivered a short adjourning motion in Hernandez's honor.

He told his colleagues that Hernandez played a key role in organizing a youth convention on the city's project to restore the Los Angeles River.

Hernandez, like Reyes, grew up in Cypress Park and dreamed of becoming a city councilman. "For him to get out of that neighborhood and do what he did took a lot of courage and discipline," Reyes said after the meeting.

Merrill was attending Pasadena City College, where he played baseball. He hoped to one day play professionally, said Christopher Mesa, one of his best friends who visited the accident site Wednesday morning.

Members of the college's baseball and softball teams also visited the site to pay their respects to their former teammate and made a cross out of baseballs.

"He loved to play," said Jay Jay Ragasa, who graduated with Merrill and Hernandez. "For Matt, it just wasn't about the physical. It was his heart."

Throughout the day, a steady stream of friends and former teammates visited the accident scene, where they placed candles, flowers and baseball mementos at a memorial.

Most, like Dagoberto Ramos, a friend of the victims, said he was still in shock.

"I lost two of them, and I'm not going to get it until the middle of the week when I call them to want to hang out," he said. "I can call, but they're not going to answer."

angie.green@latimes.com

amanda.covarrubias@ latimes.com