

# Wightman, Wieber deaths changed community

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## SANDUSKY

Although their parents still remember hearing the news like it was yesterday, they say time has soothed some of the sting.

On Feb. 19, 1989, Karrie Ann Wieber and Michelle Wightman, both sophomores at Sandusky High School, were on their way home from Magilla's, a local teen dance club. The gates were down at the Remington Avenue railroad crossing, and the warning lights were flashing when Michelle drove her Ford Tempo across the tracks.

But the gates had been down at least 20 minutes because of a disabled train at the northeast edge of the crossing, then-Sandusky police Capt. William Pierce said.

Meanwhile, several cars in front of the girls ignored the signals and drove around the gates — including a pizza delivery boy who later said he crossed the tracks several times that evening.

The girls were in the wrong place at the wrong time by mere seconds.

At 12:09 a.m., a train heading west smashed into the Tempo, dragging the four-door car more than 200 feet down the track.

They never saw it coming.

The disabled train apparently blocked Michelle's view, and she thought she could cross safely as the other vehicles had.

The Conrail train's engineer, Louis Nelson, told police he blew the train's whistle and rang his bell as he approached the crossing. He also said he pulled the emergency brake immediately after he saw the car but had only "two car lengths" to react, according to a February 1989 Register article.

The police chief at the time, Gerald Lechner, acknowledged Conrail could have been at fault because the law states a railroad may not obstruct a public street for longer than five minutes if a train is not moving. But Michelle also violated the law when she entered the crossing with the gates down.

About 20 minutes before the girls were struck, Sandusky police notified Conrail that the intersection was blocked. The railroad said it would "take care of it."

After the collision, the girls' friend, George Cantu, called Karrie's parents to tell them he thought there had been an accident.

Tom Wieber remembers waiting up that night, trying to glean any information he could from officials. But police still were investigating, and his daughter's death wasn't confirmed until what seemed like hours later.

Darlene Lowery (formerly Wightman) also heard the news through a late-night phone call. The girls were sent to different hospitals, and there was a mix-up when the families



In this undated photo, Karleen Wieber, right, and Darlene Lowery, center, cut a ribbon marking the opening of The Michelle Wightman and Karrie Wieber Pediatric Unit at Firelands Regional Medical Center.

Register file photo

went to identify the bodies.

Renee Johnson, a teacher at Mills Elementary School and Michelle's former high school basketball coach, clearly remembers the Monday morning after the crash.

"It was so quiet that day," she said. "People just looked at each other, and they started crying. Those kids knew everybody. They were very well-liked."

## Karrie Ann Wieber

On Jan. 27, 2009, Karrie's family gathers in the dining room around a sheet cake decorated with red roses — her favorite flower. Darlene ordered the cake, and, in what seems to be an ongoing tradition, Karrie's name is misspelled in sprawling icing letters.

"She would have been 36 today," her mother, Karleen, remarks softly.

Her sisters — Shannon Clark, Jennifer Chapman and Dawn Varula — sit with their school-aged children. Only one of the children — Dawn's daughter, Elyse — ever met their aunt, and she was only a toddler at the time. But all are eager to share the stories they've heard about her. They tell her they love her when they drive past the Oakland Cemetery, where she is buried. And they present her with a gift each year for her birthday as if she were still with them.

This year, it's a stuffed unicorn. Karrie's father, Tom, said each year when the family gathers to mark her birthday, he can't help but wonder about what might have been.

"You look at all the grandkids and wonder how many she would have had," he said. "You wonder how she would have fit into the family."

Although the void left by the guest of honor is tangible, the occasion is punctuated by frequent laughter and few tears.

Her sisters take turns sharing their memories of Karrie — the popular girl who loved Madonna and Cabbage Patch dolls, and the slightly rebellious teenager who wore bright blue nail polish in Dawn's wedding because she wanted to be different.

"That's how she was," Dawn said. "She was just so full of life."

She was the one who covered for her older sisters when they snuck out of the house and the one who stayed up late talking with her younger sister, Shannon, when the two shared a room.

When Dawn entered a hair styling contest, Karrie was a willing model and allowed Dawn to cut her hair in an asymmetrical fashion. She sported the unusual hairdo with such confidence that Dawn won the competition.

At the time, Karrie was dating a boy named Kevin and took in a stray cat she named after him. When she discovered the cat was a girl, it became Kevina. The sisters inherited the cat when she died, and it lived for 17 years.

As they joke about her antics, they also remember her dreams. Karrie always said when she graduated high school, she wanted to work at Cedar Point or be a model.

"We try to keep it light, knowing that ... if you really believe in God, you know that you're going to see her someday," Tom said.

Karleen said in spite of the sadness, the event gives the family something to look forward to.

"I think it keeps us going," she said.

The first year they celebrated her birthday without her, the emotional wounds were raw, and the family was still in shock, Karleen and Tom recalled. But the second year, after the permanency of the situation sunk in, it was worse.

"Now, 20 years later, it still seems like yesterday," Karleen said, "but you realize you can move on with your life."

## Michelle Lee Wightman

In her ranch-style home, off a secluded driveway overlooking the wildlife in Berlin Heights, Darlene Lowery holds a photograph of a smiling girl with sparkling eyes behind wide-framed glasses. The girl bears a striking resemblance to her mother.

Her sisters had left the nest, and the baby of the family had a close relationship with her mom, Darlene.

"It was kind of hard not to favor her because she was more like a friend to me, besides being a daughter, because it was just her and I at home," she said. "That was the only one I had to worry about."

Michelle worked alongside her mother and Karrie at the American Legion Post 83, waitressing and bussing tables. She was a teacher aide who also was active in girls junior varsity basketball, student council and the Ski Club. To her sisters, she was the athlete of the family with the quirky sense of humor.

Her sister, Tricia Patten, 39, of Castalia, said she remembers the two of them staying out until dark most nights with their neighborhood friends on Lindsley Street. They played kick-the-can and other games until the street lights came on.

"My mom worked two jobs growing up, so we took care of each other," Tricia said.

Tricia, who has four children, including 15-year-old twins, said she won't allow them to drive when they turn 16.

She points to the crash to highlight the importance of safe driving and said she hopes other parents do the same.

With six years between them, Norwalk resident Tracey Risner, 42, said she was often more like a mother to Michelle than a sister. But they shared many laughs.

"I just remember how loving she was — to our mother and to us," Tracey said. "Not many 16-year-olds tell their mother they love them every day."

Like Tricia, Tracey said she often wonders who Michelle would be today. She dreamed of being a police officer in California and targeting the drug problems there.

But she also pictures her as a generous and involved aunt — possibly a mother as well.

Coping with the loss of her youngest daughter, Darlene said she went through a phase of shutting out those closest to her.

"It was easier," she said. At the time, she worked at her parents' lawn mower business, and her father always seemed to sense when she was upset.

"He'd say, 'OK, come here,' Darlene said. "He'd put a motor on the floor and give me a sledgehammer — and I would just cream it. I got a lot of anger out, a lot of frustration."

Both families also went to Compassionate Friends, a support group at Stein Hospice, to help them talk through their grief.