

Friends mourn cyclist as safety questioned

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SANTA CRUZ -- Christopher Evan Rock was a deaf Westside man who survived a severe brain bleed about 14 years ago but was killed pedaling his bicycle on Mission Street on Tuesday, friends said. View a slide show from the Santa Cruz Sentinel

Those who knew Rock, 40, said he didn't speak much, and communicated mainly through notes and sign language. Still, cyclists remembered him as a mainstay in the bike lane who went out of his way to share a smile.

"He was just a really friendly person," said cyclist Elaina Ramer, 24, of Santa Cruz, who often ran into Rock at Caffe Pergolesi in downtown Santa Cruz. "Whenever you would show up there he would always greet people and say goodbye."

Rock grew up in Silicon Valley, and moved to Santa Cruz after recovering from a brain bleed in college that left him unconscious for days, said Leslie Katske, 57, of Saratoga, a friend of Rock's family since 1979.

The bleeding took a toll on Rock's cognitive skills, Katske said, forcing him to drop out of school and limiting his ability to drive.

As a result, Rock would ride his bike or walk everywhere he went. He also had a hard time holding a job, and made money doing odd chores for folks in town, Katske said.

He moved to Santa Cruz after his recovery because he always loved the city and enjoyed his friends in the Central Coast deaf community, Katske said.

"He's been over there since," she said.

Another cyclist death

Rock died about 12:30 p.m. Tuesday after the trailer of a quarry truck struck and killed him as he rode his bicycle toward downtown on Mission Street. The driver did not realize he had been involved in an accident until officers stopped him near the intersection of highways 1 and 9, said Santa Cruz police Capt. Steve Clark. The accident, at Mission and Bay streets, was the second cyclist death in that spot since August. Another was seriously injured shortly before the first fatality.

The driver's name has not been released. But Clark said the man has worked for eight years for Hildebrand Trucking out of Pajaro and had a clean driving record. On Tuesday, he was carrying 7,800 pounds of sand from Pilarcitos Quarry in Half Moon Bay to Las Animas Concrete in Santa Cruz.

"They describe him as a model employee," Clark said. "He is absolutely devastated by this."

Officers are still investigating the crash and have not concluded who was at fault or if charges will be filed. An autopsy on Rock is pending, Clark said.

Sharing the road

Along with remembering Rock, cyclists and city leaders again are questioning how to improve safety on the county's busiest surface street.

Caltrans spokeswoman Susana Cruz said the state agency, which has jurisdiction over Mission Street as part of Highway 1, has put a rush order on new fluorescent "Share the Road" signs. They should be installed in a few weeks, Cruz said, along with signs on either end of the corridor telling motorists to watch for cyclists and pedestrians.

But Cruz also placed responsibility with community leaders, who approved a plan about 10 years ago to widen Mission Street without adding bike lanes.

"There were many community meetings that took years," Cruz said. "The plan was accepted and approved by the community back then."

City Councilwoman Emily Reilly, who owns Emily's Bakery on Mission, said residents should not place blame on past planning but instead look toward solutions.

"The decision not to put bike lanes on Mission was made a very long time ago," Reilly said. "What we have to do now is to take a look at what we actually have and what we need to do."

That, however, still needs to be decided.

'Shocked'

A plan to build a bikeway on King Street -- hatched after a Pacific Collegiate School teacher was killed while pedaling down Mission in August -- is in progress, said Cheryl Schmitt, Santa Cruz bicycle/pedestrian coordinator. But Schmitt said she doesn't think a new bikeway on King will end the Mission Street problems.

"Bicyclists still need access to businesses, schools and residences on Mission," Schmitt said.

Micah Posner, director of bicycle advocacy group People Power, said he takes some responsibility for the lack of bike lanes on Mission.

People Power had only 60 members when the decision was made not to include bike lanes, Posner said, and the group did not take the aggressive stands that it does now, with 440 members. Posner was a member then, and said that experience was a big reason he took over as People Power's director.

"The organization clearly needed to be reinvigorated," Posner said. "We're never going to have anything like this happen again."

Posner was one of the leaders of a memorial ride Wednesday evening, where hundreds of cyclists mourned the recent deaths on Mission Street.

Katske said she can't believe that the city would not take more drastic measures to make Mission safer for cyclists like Rock.

"We're all kind of shocked that this is a place in Santa Cruz that seems to have continuous problems," Katske said. "It would be nice if somebody could do something about it so that no other people were hurt." Contact G. Bookwalter at 706-3286 or gbookwalter@santacruzsentinel.com.