

SLT children's memorial creating unwanted grief

"There is no footprint too small to leave an imprint on this world." – Author unknown

By Kathryn Reed

For those who have lost a child, that individual's footprint has left an impression far deeper than most will ever know.

There are many ways to memorialize a loss. In South Lake Tahoe there is the Children's Memorial at the corner of Highway 50 and Wildwood Avenue. More than 200 plaques have been placed on the tree since October 1994, when the tree was first dedicated.

Driven by the tragic death of her son, Rory, along with his two friends Sandy Haynes and Casey Wells in an automobile accident, Sue Hrbacek-Miller hoped to place, in a public location, the tree that the car struck on the night of Feb. 2, 1991.

Age and weather made the original tree no longer viable so a few years ago a "log" made out of a concrete-polymer material was installed with the idea it would be permanent.



The log has names of children from South Lake Tahoe who have died. Photo/LTN

The process to get a plaque on the tree has been simple and difficult at the same time.

This past summer Kenny Curtzwiler told the City Council he knows of 12 people who have run into issues at the city in regards to getting a name on the memorial. City Councilwoman JoAnn Conner has tried to get the topic on an agenda for months. It is supposed to be on the Nov. 15 agenda.

Lake Tahoe News reached out to Curtzwiler and Conner. Neither could provide *Lake Tahoe News* with names of anyone who supposedly is having an issue with the city.

“I will work on the list, but most of the people who contact me I just refer them over to Nancy [Kerry] by passing on her information and then lose the contacts,” Curtzwiler told *Lake Tahoe News*.

City Manager Nancy Kerry told *Lake Tahoe News* that Curtzwiler provided five names of people who had contacted him in 2013, 2014 or 2015. She said one was for a South Lake Tahoe child and that the mother told her she has yet to fill out the paperwork.

Conner did not speak to *LTN* until confronted at the last council meeting.

“They want to meet with a parent, to share their grief. They don’t want to be grilled,” Conner said. Many at the city are parents and some have even lost a child.

Conner had no names to provide to *Lake Tahoe News*.

When asked by the council and staff to provide names, she wouldn’t. Councilman Tom Davis asked her to provide names to him later so he could help. To this day she has not done so.

The city staff is in a quandary because it cannot help people without knowing who needs help.

Cindy Juarez spoke with *Lake Tahoe News* about her experience in getting her son’s name on the tree. Dave Suarez died seven years ago at the age of 42. He had worked in the produce department at Safeway for 15 years and had lived here for more than 20 years.

“With the passion my son had for Lake Tahoe I would really like for him to be a part of [the memorial tree]. At this point I’m not sure it will happen,” Juarez said from her home in the Bay Area. “Everyone has been very nice to me, but I felt I spent a week and got nowhere. It wasn’t that people didn’t seem as if they wanted to help me, but they didn’t have solutions.”

Lauren Thomaselli is in charge of the memorial tree for the city. She has people fill out a short form, directs them to a shop to get the plaque made and the city for free then installs the plaque.

In a memo to Kerry, Thomaselli wrote, “We have found that the new owner of Awards of Tahoe is not very easy to get a hold of and does not follow through in a timely manner – but this is more a problem for the family requesting the plaque.”

No one from Awards of Tahoe returned *LTN*'s call.

That is where the breakdown is for Juarez. While she was up here last week she couldn't get the plaque made. The city doesn't provide another alternative to the one they know is not working. All the plaques on the tree are the same size, same font, same point size, but what those are are not conveyed to people wanting a plaque.

Juarez said she was told to take a picture of one and get a plaque made in the Bay Area. She doesn't have a smart phone to be able to so.

Just reaching the right person in the city was time consuming, she said. Nothing at the memorial site says who to call. For now, Juarez is at a loss as to how to proceed.