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3 die in head-on crash

A standout Sheridan teen, a retiree and his sister are killed in Hwy. 65 collision.

By Art Campos -- Bee Staff Writer
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They lived just one block apart in the small town of Sheridan, but they didn't know each other.

Eddy Yepez, 16, was described by a school principal as "the shining star of Sheridan."

The other, Paul James Ponce, was 66 and was adored by his 87-year-old mother, his siblings and his grown children.



"He was so kind to me - always," said his mother, Calletana Ponce of Santa Clara. "He always looked after me."

On Monday night, the teenager and the older man met - but it was in a violent traffic collision on two-lane Highway 65 near Nader Road, less than two miles from their homes.

Both were killed, as was Ponce's 63-year-old sister, Rose Ponce of Sheridan, which is eight miles northwest of Lincoln in Placer County.

The California Highway Patrol said Yepez tried to pass a slower-moving vehicle in the northbound lane at about 8:30 p.m. The teen crossed a double yellow line in the attempt.

His 2001 Ford Focus crashed head-on into Paul Ponce's southbound 1984 Buick Limited, the CHP said. Yepez and Rose Ponce died at the scene, the CHP said.

Paul Ponce was taken by medical helicopter to a local hospital and was pronounced dead.

Their deaths were being mourned Tuesday by residents who stopped at the country store on Riosa Road and Highway 65.

"I'm tired of people getting killed on this road," said Paula Swetnam of nearby Wheatland. "There is constant danger. Highway 65 needs some passing lanes."

At Sheridan Elementary School, Kris Knutson, the principal, said, "In a little town like this, everyone knows just about everyone else. I know this loss will reverberate throughout our school for the entire coming school year."

Knutson described Yepez as the town's "shining star" - a magnet to other students in Sheridan and Lincoln.

"He was going to be a junior at Lincoln High School, but he was already preparing himself to go to the Air Force Academy," Knutson said.

"Everyone latched on to this kid. He knew he was special. He had a great deal of confidence. That spilled over to the people around him."

Elena Yepez, the boy's mother, said her son was in the high school's ROTC program and that he was an athlete who participated in cross-country, basketball and track and field. Outside of school, her son enjoyed sketching, computer games and playing paintball, she said.

She said her son had a 4.4 grade point average and was interested in completing as many summer courses as possible to speed up his high school education.

He wanted to go to the Air Force Academy after high school and also expressed interest in being a business owner someday, she said.

Knutson said Eddy Yepez was taking a calculus class at Sierra College in Rocklin on Monday night as part of his preparatory steps for the Air Force Academy.

"He was on his way back from the class when the accident happened," Knutson said.

While the teenager was headed home, Paul Ponce and his sister, Rose, were going into Lincoln to pick up some takeout food, said his son, Michael Ponce, 38, of Sheridan.

"They were going to get Kentucky Fried Chicken, my dad's favorite," he said. "My aunt had just come over and Dad said, 'KFC! Let's go.' "

Michael Ponce described his father as kind and giving.

"My dad would buy me the best pair of shoes," he said. "I was a musician in a band and he would buy me the guitar. He pretty much financed the whole band.

"When somebody had a birthday in the family, he would send the most expensive cards he could find. He did the same at Christmas."

Paul Ponce was a carpenter and once refurbished his mother's home in Santa Clara.

"He completely modernized it," Michael Ponce said. "I called it the 'Ponce-arosa.' "

Paul Ponce's oldest son, Paul Jr. of San Jose, called his dad "my buddy, my best friend."

"I would call him up every day, just to see how he was doing," he said. "We often went fishing in the Feather River. We were going to do that this weekend."

Paul Ponce Sr. was a retired machinist from Santa Clara, where he had made his mark in high school football, Michael Ponce said.

"He was a linebacker at Santa Clara High and they made him captain of the varsity team as a sophomore," the son said. "He could hit very hard. He was like a (former San Francisco 49er) Ronnie Lott out there."

After graduation in 1958, Paul Ponce joined the Army, where he learned skills as a machinist, which he later used to help build Army tanks with FMC in Santa Clara, which had a contract to build the Bradley fighting vehicle, his sons said.

Prior to that, he worked as a machinist for Aerospace Engineers in Santa Clara, they said.

Paul Ponce was divorced and his ex-wife died 13 years ago, they said. He retired nine years ago and moved to Sheridan for a quieter, more rural lifestyle, Michael Ponce said.

His sister, Rose, followed him three years ago to Sheridan.

"She was my favorite aunt," said Michael Ponce. "She was a very loving, nonjudgmental person. She always saw the good in any situation. I always listened to her because everything she said was right. I loved her."

In recent years, Paul Ponce had developed heart problems, family members said, and old injuries to his knees had made it difficult for him to walk.

Michael Ponce moved from Santa Clara to his father's home to look after him, he said.

The Ponce family bemoaned the dangerous stretch of Highway 65 from Lincoln to Sheridan.

"Many people who drive Highway 65 are so impatient," said Martha Rabello, Paul and Rose Ponce's sister from Santa Clara. "People weave in and out of oncoming traffic just to get one car length ahead."

At the grocery store up the street, Katherine White of Sheridan said, "People drive too fast on 65. I sometimes take the back roads to work in Lincoln, just because I don't want to be on Highway 65."

Jan Mendoza, a spokeswoman for the California Department of Transportation, said no improvements are slated on Highway 65 until 2008 when construction on the Lincoln Bypass is expected to begin.

Mendoza said Highway 65 is a safe, two-lane route as long as drivers remain patient.

"It's not the highway's fault. I blame the drivers," she said. "Basically, you need to take your time. This accident is definitely a sad reminder to do one thing - and that is to keep your foot off that gas pedal."