

The end of laughter, the end of 4 lives

Shed a memorial to crash victims

By KATHERINE ESPOSITO
and STEVE SCHULTZE
Journal Madison bureau

Madison, Wis. — The athletic equipment shed at West High School was always painted in cheery splashes of white, green and blue, remembering teams that brought glory and fame to the students and school.

On Thursday night, the symbolic cheers on the shed and nearby brick wall were replaced by a different tribute: personal messages memorializing four friends who died in a fiery car accident about 3:15 that morning.

Vicram Sekhon, 17, Jason Wilson, 16, Michael Schoenfeld, 16, and Peter Iannone, 16, were killed when the 1982 four-door Volvo they were riding in rolled over on a sharp turn on Madison's West Side. The Volvo, registered to Vicram's father, was traveling much too fast to make the S-curve on Tokay Blvd., police spokesman Steve Smithson said.

The four friends who died would have been seniors at West this fall.

About 25 friends of the four youths turned out to whitewash and spray-paint the shed and wall with lyrics from favorite songs and lines from well-worn jokes. They wanted passers-by to know just who their friends had been, just what had been important to them, and that they did not fail in their efforts.

Scribbled on the shed and wall: "You're on your stairway to heaven." "Thanks guys, '89." "Wish you were here." "Good-bye." "Magic Carpet Ride." "Surfs up dude." "Catch a wave." "I love you Jason Wilson."

Donald Scullion, Dane County deputy coroner, said it appeared that Vicram Sekhon had been driving the car.

The car was going so fast that it flipped and skidded on its roof nearly a full city block after it failed to negotiate the curve, Smithson said.

The car rolled over 2½ times and burst into flames, police said. At least two of the youths died while trying the escape from the burning car, said a resident of the area.

A rough chronology of the events leading to the accident was pieced together through interviews with friends of the victims and with others who saw them late Wednesday and early Thursday.

Many of the same friends who were painting the shed Thursday at West High were at a party Wednesday night. At the party, the group watched 1960s videos of the rock groups Led Zeppelin and the Doors, several students said. The students did not want to say which friend had been host for the party, for fear of getting the friend into trouble.

Asked whether the students at the party had been drinking, one boy said, "No comment."

But one of Vicram's friends, Sarah Fishbain, 17, said she didn't think that he had been drinking because he had planned to drive home.

Elizabeth Wright, the fiancée of Michael Schoenfeld's father, said:

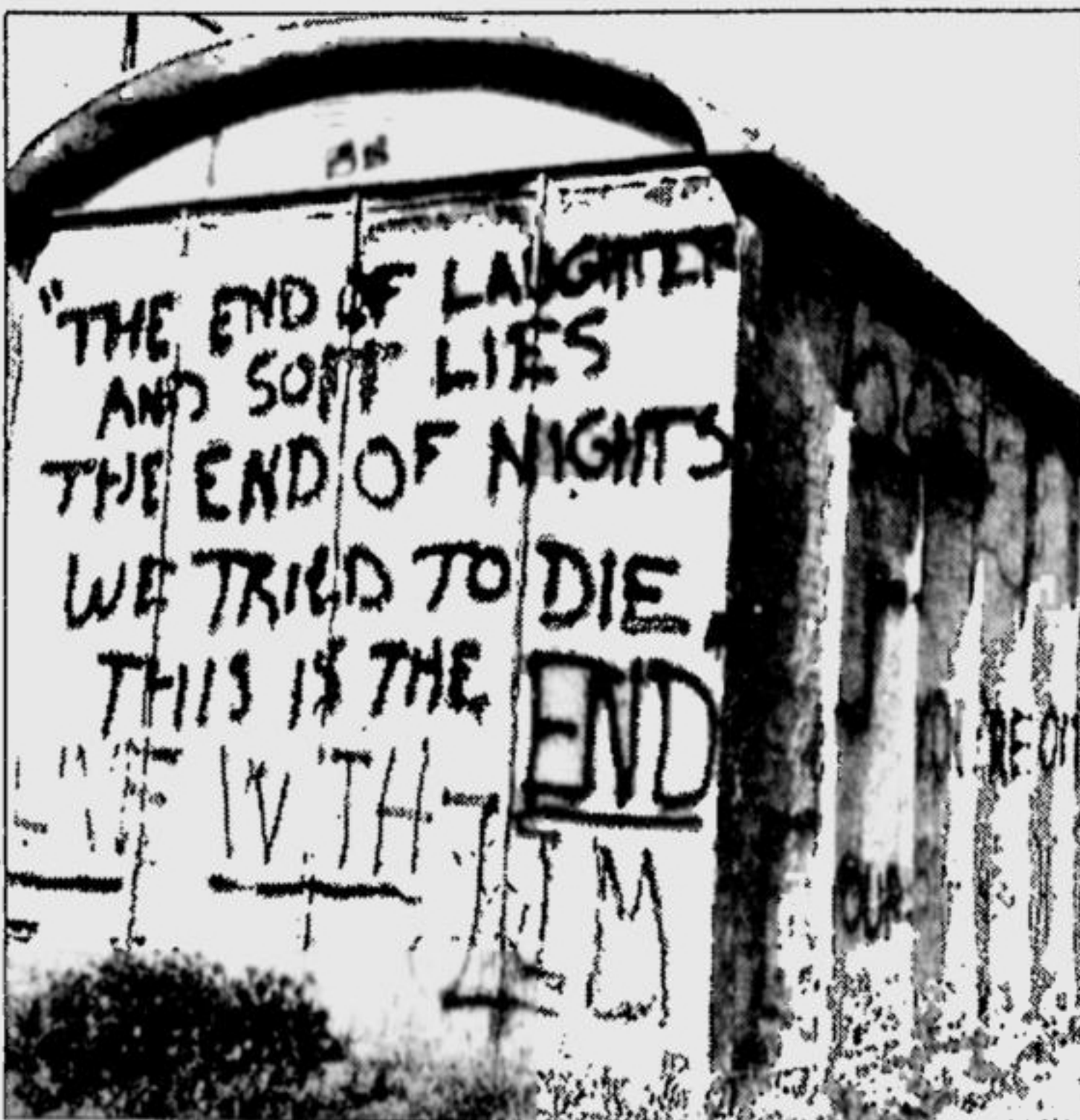
"We don't know if the kids were drinking, although that's plausible.

"You know kids that age. They like to drive around."



AP photo

Four students at Madison West High School died when this car rolled over and burned



AP photo/Morry Gash

Students painted messages on a shed at Madison West after four students were killed in a car accident in Madison

Coroner Raymond Wosepca said toxicology test results were not yet available to show whether alcohol was in the systems of those who died.

The four friends left the party before 12:30 a.m. Thursday and went to an all-night Perkins restaurant on Madison's West Side. They arrived about 2:30 a.m. and stayed until 3, said Mandy Kenyon, the waitress who served them.

The four youths were loud and joking in a friendly way, she said.

"They weren't drunk," she said. "They were just acting like a bunch of teenagers."

Kenyon said she remembered the group because they were the only

customers on one side of the restaurant and she had seen them there on other occasions.

The victims of the crash all were remembered in glowing terms.

All had been athletes and considered good students. Michael Schoenfeld and Peter Iannone played football, Jason Wilson was on the school gymnastics team and Vicram Sekhon was a star soccer player who intended to practice in Europe during the summer months, his friends said.

Another friend of Peter, Heath Whalen, 17, said he had planned to attend football camp with Peter in River Falls this summer.

But the one theme that consistently drew the crowd of sun-bronzed,

energetic teenagers together was music: not punk music or pop, but stuff recorded before they were born.

Michael loved to imitate Led Zeppelin's lead singer, Robert Plant, from watching the video, said Sean Terry, 16, one of Michael's best buddies.

"We always listened to it," Terry said. "Mike knew every motion Plant would make."

As a testament to the victims' love of music, their friends sprayed lines from their favorite songs on the shed, on top of fresh white oil paint that covered up the old hurrahs.

One line, from a Doors song, had been really special. It read:

The end of laughter
And soft lies
The end of nights
We tried to die
This is the end.

Spray-painted on another side of the shed was a butterfly with curling wings. Jason's mother had painted it earlier, the students said.

Vicram, or Vic, as he was called, started to date senior Tracy Keller only a month before. Choking back tears, she said that Vic, who was of East Indian descent, had been handsome, with dark curly hair and "nice soccer legs."

They'd often cruise in Vic's car: the Volvo that burned in the crash.

"He was always friendly to others, and was always in a good mood," she recalled.

"Every time the phone rings, I think it's Vic."

Tracy attended the party Wednesday night, and Vic dropped her off at home before they went to the restaurant, she said. As it turned out, she was the last of the party group to see him alive, she said.

On Thursday morning, Tracy heard a radio report that a four-door Volvo had been involved in a serious accident. She suspected that it might have been Vic's.

She called his father to ask whether he was OK.

"His dad said, 'Vic died last night.' 'This still doesn't seem real.'"