Middlebury College mourns

Four students die in Quebec automobile accident

By Leslie Koren
Free Press Staff Writer

Four tall candles burned, and four empty chairs faced the pews in Mead Chapel on the Middlebury Campus where students gathered Monday to mourn.

An accident on the road back from Montreal killed four students, three immediately. The fourth died Monday night after undergoing surgery.

The first-year students had gone Saturday for a day of shopping and a night of fun. They were on Quebec Route 133 South about 8:45 Sunday morning, halfway home, when their car crossed into the northbound lane, went down a ditch and hit a drainage pipe.

"There was a major collision there," said Gilles Mitchell of the Quebec Provincial Police. Police are not sure what caused the accident or whether alcohol was involved.

Maika Prewitt, 18, was the driver of the red, two-door Pontiac Sunfire; Anisa Gamble, 19, was a passenger in the back seat; and Inuko Johnson, 18, was in the front passenger seat. All died at the scene.

Tiffany Holmes, 18, survived surgery but died in intensive care at Charles Lemoyne Hospital in Greenfield Park, Quebec, said a woman who identified herself as her sister.

"She had a lot of spunk. Feisty, outgoing, intelligent," she said. "I lost my best friend."

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At Middlebury, mourners streamed in and out of the chapel throughout the day, wearing white ribbons pinned to their shirts. Some howled with sadness, others were silent and sobbing. Students walked alone, with tear-swollen eyes, and huddled in pairs through the rain on the gray campus.

"The smiles on their faces ... if you were in a class with them, there's no way you could not know who they were," said Ulises Zanello, 19, a freshman from New York City who was good friends with the young women.

The four were a tight group, Zanello said. Three of them had just been to Washington, D.C., for spring break and two went to Florida for vacation in February.

"They were great girls. They made such an impact on the campus," he said. "We're all going in and out of numbness."

Inside the chapel, memorials to each of the three killed immediately held pictures and notes from students. The chapel filled with sadness and the lost promise of the three.

"Anisa — Let God take care of all of us," wrote one friend.

To Holmes, whom students were still hoping would survive, there was support and encouragement to get better.

"Tiffany — Believe in life because it definitely believes in you."

Students were informed of the accident by e-mail Sunday night from Student Affairs. Monday, Middlebury President John McCardell Jr. wrote a formal message telling the students about the young women and aid to those grieving.

"As we mourn their tragic, inexplicable passing, let us take from this experience, and from the example of their own brief, shining lives, a new recognition of the precious fragility of the human relationships in this community," he wrote.

Because the four women were black and were all heavily involved in groups dedicated to promoting diversity, their loss is likely to have a significant impact on the campus, said Phil Benoit, director of public affairs for the college.

"Just focusing on their personalities and their accomplishments may cause people to pay attention to the diversity issue," Benoit said.

An informal evening gathering at the chapel began with the Middlebury College Choir singing "Amazing Grace." Plans for a formal memorial service have not been announced.

Johnson was a member of the choir, as well as three others on campus. She was a dancer who was trying to decide whether to major in math, theater arts or dance. She grew up in Washington, D.C., where she had run her own business as a hair stylist.

Prewitt went to high school in Missouri but had also lived in Saudi Arabia and traveled to such places as Germany, Kenya, Thailand and the Seychelles. She was a violinist and an ice skater as well as a D.A.R.E. role model. She was a member of the National Coalition Building Institute, which aims to celebrate diversity in everyday life.

Gamble was a native of St. Croix in the Virgin Islands and had planned to major in finance. She also was a dancer and was involved with the Pan-Caribbean Student Organization. She recently spoke about Martin Luther King Jr. in the same chapel in which she was now mourned.

Holmes was a graduate of the La Guardia High School of Music, Art and Performing Arts in New York City. She was a Posse Scholar and planned to focus on philosophy or math. The Posse program encourages students from the inner city to go to colleges they wouldn't ordinarily attend. This is the first year for Posse Scholars at Middlebury. She was also known for her extraordinary singing voice.

Students often travel to Montreal for fun and a taste of the big city, especially as the weather turns better, Benoit said.

"It's a nice getaway," Zanello said. "I was planning to go next weekend, but I don't know."