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## Families recall loved ones killed Christmas Eve

**Luis Carlos Lopez** El Paso Times

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After spending the evening with their father, Joshua and Isaiah Deal decided to drive home about 1:30 a.m. on Christmas Eve last year. Joshua's girlfriend, Shannon Del Rio, was in the car with them.

As they left the home of the Deals' father and stepmother, Del Rio texted her brother to say she was on her way home.

As the three were headed eastbound on Vista del Sol Drive, a Camaro traveling south on Joe Battle Boulevard allegedly ran a red light, striking them in the driver's side door, police said. The Pontiac Grand Am carrying the Deal brothers and Shannon Del Rio burst into flames.

All three were killed. Joshua was 23, Isaiah, 19, and Shannon, 22.

"There was no Christmas," said Dee Cisneros, the brothers' mother. "I didn't even know it was Christmas Day. The day just went so long, since we were up so early on Christmas Eve.

Police said Isaiah Deal was thrown from the car and died shortly afterward at Del Sol Medical Center. Del Rio and Joshua Deal died in the fiery crash. Del Rio was identified by the promise ring Joshua Deal had given her on their fifth anniversary, and dental records were used to identify him, his parents said.

"It was a blessing he was ejected," Dee Cisneros said of Isaiah Deal. He was carrying his wallet, which helped in the identification of everyone in the car.

Former El Paso boxer Joel Garcia Jr., who was 24 at the time, was arrested hours later and charged with intoxication manslaughter. Garcia admitted to drinking at least five beers and two shots before the crash, and a police report lists his blood-alcohol level at 0.268 – more than three times the legal limit, according to police records.

However, police failed to read him his Miranda rights or get a warrant to test his blood, and as a result his confession and blood-alcohol level are no longer admissible in court.

Garcia was jailed concurrently for nearly a year on the intoxication manslaughter charges and on an unrelated previous charge of driving while intoxicated. He has since been released on bond on the intoxication manslaughter charges. During a Dec. 3 court hearing, a state district court judge denied a motion by state prosecutors to increase Garcia's bond. An increased bond might have sent him back to jail.

A court order prohibits the families, the police, state prosecutors and defense lawyers from talking about the case. However, the families agreed to talk to the El Paso Times on the condition they are not asked about the case.

The year since the deaths has "been very difficult. People, I don't think, really grasp how, besides the tragedy and having to deal with all the legalities that come along with it, it's a nightmare," Cisneros said. "You'll never know the extent of it until you are actually in it."

The families are still reeling from their losses, dealing with litigation and working through some interfamily strife.

Both families remember the two young men as people who lived life to its fullest. While the Deal brothers had the same biological father, they lived with their mother and stepfather, Richard Cisneros, who helped raised the boys since they were toddlers.

Joshua Deal was the quiet and thoughtful musician who loved to take pictures and would often dress up as a pirate while he and Del Rio strolled through the mall.

Isaiah Deal was the athlete who loved sports and, as Richard Cisneros remembers, was a young man with confidence who "never found a mirror that he did not like."

Dee Cisneros said, "Isaiah was a big presence. Joshua was quiet. I always called them 'night and day' because Joshua could be in the room and you would never know it. Isaiah liked the sound of his voice."

Joshua Deal graduated from El Dorado High School in 2010. He worked for the Coca-Cola Co. and attended El Paso Community College, where he was studying to become a graphic design artist.

Isaiah Deal did not shy from a confrontation, loved lifting weights and was just a few weeks away from joining the U.S. Army when he died. He was a 2014 Americas High School

graduate. He played right tackle for the school's football team and earned the nickname "Big Deal."

More than 1,000 family members and friends gathered at Cielo Vista Church in East El Paso for the brothers' memorial Jan. 3. Shortly after their deaths, a cross and other memorial items were erected near the scene of the crash, which is about two minutes by car from their father and stepmother's home.

Since their deaths, there have been vigils, celebrations commemorating their birthdays and an effort to keep the legacy of the brothers and Del Rio alive by using their story to help organizations such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

As Christmas approaches, each family is still struggling with the aftermath.

Father Jo Jo Deal and his wife, Gloria Deal, are still coping with the loss and said they haven't decided how they will spend Christmas. Jo Jo Deal said he did not want to be interviewed because he is still processing the loss.

"The only thing that we have thought about is going to the memorial site," Gloria Deal said. "It's been a year like we've never had before. It's been very different, you know, just emptiness. It's going to be the first year that we don't see them for Christmas. We are missing both of them."

Last year, Joshua and Isaiah Deal and Shannon Del Rio were visiting Jo Jo and Gloria Deal and the Deals' half-sister, Jordyn Deal, for an early Christmas gathering. Isaiah Deal's girlfriend, Denise Ramirez, said they were playing video games and talking. Ramirez said she left an hour before the brothers.

Gloria Deal said the brothers and Del Rio left the house at about 1:30 in the morning.

"They had been playing video games with Jordyn and she fell asleep. Josh had to go to work early in the morning," Gloria Deal said.

The boys were supposed to drop off Del Rio and head home. They didn't drive far before the deadly two-vehicle crash.

"My husband went to go look for them and he ran into the accident, right down the street at the corner of Vista del Sol and Joe Battle," Gloria Deal said.

Dee Cisneros said the night of the accident was surreal.

“Shannon was very good at texting. She had sent a message that she was on her way home and, of course, she didn’t show up,” Richard Cisneros said.

The families started making calls, first to relatives and then to local hospitals, then began driving in the area to look for their car. Fearing the worst, they headed to local hospitals, ending up at Del Sol Medical Center’s emergency room.

“Have you ever seen an ER that was dim and quiet? That’s what I remember. Walking through there, wondering why there were no people there,” Dee Cisneros said.

Del Rio's mother, Laura Del Rio, said that on the night of the accident, while they were at the hospital waiting to hear news from the doctors, they saw images of the crash site on the television.

"They separated the Cisneroses and us and we were waiting for a word. They had the TV and they showed the car and you can tell the car was on fire," Laura Del Rio said.

When doctors told her that her daughter was still at the scene, Laura Del Rio said the pain was overwhelming.

"She’s still at the scene. There was a fire. I thought I was going to lose my head," she said. "You replay the accident in your head and then you feel guilty because you weren’t there to help."

The Del Rio family still relives the accident. A smell, a song or a trip near The Hospital of Providence, East Campus, which is one of the hospitals they visited while they searched for Shannon Del Rio, can trigger the memories, the family said.

Dee Cisneros said the deaths of her boys and her father's health complications made Christmas a tough time last year.

As she reflected on the lives of her children, she mourned. This Christmas Eve, Richard and Dee Cisneros will go to church and visit the site of the accident. She’s only been to the memorial near the accident site once, for a candlelight vigil.

“I haven’t gone by since the previous vigil. I will go there the 24th,” she said.

“You still expect them to walk through the door. I don’t think reality has really sunk in,” she said.

On the night of the accident, Joshua Deal and Shannon Del Rio, who were planning to marry, were talking about what their children would look like.

After their deaths, the families found papers with the baby names Shannon Del Rio was considering for her future child. Liam Chase Deal was the name that she had written repeatedly. Laura Del Rio said the name her daughter was considering for a girl was Isabella.

"They were happy; they were simple. They were just like two kids. They never hurt anybody," Laura Del Rio said.

For Dee Cisneros, thinking about Joshua Deal's hopes of getting married and having children brought her to tears.

"I don't get to spoil grandchildren. They were good children, young adults," she said "It's just sad that there's a whole light that you don't see."

Laura and Javier Del Rio are still coping with the loss of their daughter. Both described her as a caring and sensitive person who went above and beyond to help others.

"Ever since she was little we noticed that she was very kindhearted. She was very sensitive ... She was very aware of people's feelings. She was always careful about what she would say to people," Laura Del Rio said.

Shannon Del Rio's older brother, Isaac Del Rio, 29, was the last person Shannon texted before the accident. She told him to leave the door unlocked because she had forgotten her keys.

"She was very honest. She was very kind. As an older brother, I learned a lot from her," Isaac Del Rio said.

Shannon worked at a Hallmark store on Lee Treviño Drive and would go out of her way to help customers, Laura Del Rio said. When she didn't have a car to get to school, she would take the bus and mastered all the stops and routes.

"There was no obstacle that she could not overcome," Javier Del Rio said.

Talking about Shannon Del Rio's plan to marry Joshua Deal, Javier Del Rio admitted that he, like most fathers, kept his guard up to protect his daughter.

"She was number one for me. As a father, you always have a defense mechanism when she starts having boyfriends. What I saw from Josh, and I think what she saw in Josh, was a little

bit of the way I was," Javier Del Rio said.

"I would treat her like a princess, like a queen because that's how a woman should be treated and I didn't want anybody to mistreat my daughter. I would not want her to accept anything less than the way I treated her."

Both parents also talked about Shannon Del Rio's love for reading and how she would often read aloud to Joshua Deal. By all accounts, both of them were huge "Harry Potter" fans, so much so that a friend of Shannon Del Rio's met "Harry Potter" actor Tom Felton and had him write a posthumous dedication on a photo of him as the character Draco Malfoy.

Laura Del Rio said her daughter would have graduated from the University of Texas at El Paso this month. She was studying human resources and wanted to travel to England. To commemorate her daughter, Laura Del Rio held a book drive for kindergarten students at Vista del Sol Elementary School. She wants to promote her daughter's love of reading. "To Shannon & Joshua, lots of love," the dedication reads.

"If she saw you were in pain, it hurt her. If you cried, she cried. That's the kind of person she was. She would stop what she was doing to help others. As a daughter, you couldn't ask for more," Laura Del Rio said.

For Javier Del Rio, the upcoming holiday season is a reminder of the gift he received from his daughter last year that remains unopened.

"We can't," he said about celebrating Christmas this year and opening the gift.

"Every time I look at those gifts ... her little hands wrapped that gift and I don't know if I can tear it apart. That's the last thing I have from her," he said.

For almost a year now, the front door of Laura Del Rio's home in East El Paso still has the holiday decorations that Joshua Deal made for her.

She said that he wanted to make something special for her since he said she always gave Christmas cards but never received them. To remedy that, he put wrapping paper behind the front door and added a Coca-Cola Christmas card that he received from his employees as a symbolic gesture. The door was later filled with a few more cards.

While the decorations don't look out of place this time of year, they are weathered by nearly 365 days of grief and mourning.

Laura Del Rio said she can still see the smudges where Joshua Deal pressed the tape on the white door. She also remembers with vivid detail the grime that her future son-in-law got on his fingers.

For a year now, she has looked at the Coca-Cola card before going to work.

“I always look at it and say, ‘Bye, Josh.’ I think of him. He was a good kid,” Laura Del Rio said.

The loss for Dee Cisneros is more than she could imagine. “I miss them more than anything. I talk to them every day,” she said.

They were happy the last time she saw them.

“They died happy. What more could anybody ask for?” she said.

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Joel Garcia out on bond, awaits appeal ruling