

Friend's loss inspires senior

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By **Donnie Fetter** | *Columbia County Bureau*

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Tariq Fischer, along with friends Muhammad Hasan and Imran Kahn, died on a rainy Wednesday afternoon last year when the 19-year-old lost control of his BMW, skidded across the Interstate 20 median near the Crawfordville, Ga., exit and collided with eastbound traffic.

Mr. Fischer's former Lakeside High School classmate and friend Kim Newman believes he and his friends would still be alive had a cable barrier been in place to slow the momentum of his car before he slammed into the side of a tractor-trailer.

Whether cable barriers would save Georgia motorists' lives is the focus of Ms. Newman's senior project, which she dedicated to her friend.

Her inspiration came on a road trip with her family a few days after the July accident, the 18-year-old said.

"I had been thinking for a while about what I wanted to do my senior project on when I was heading out of town," she said. "All of a sudden, when we hit South Carolina I started to notice the cable barriers. I had never noticed them before."

She delved into her research, looking up cross-over accident death tolls, reading news reports and speaking with lawmakers and transportation officials. She will present her findings to a panel of senior project judges Tuesday.

"It's really lowered the death toll a lot in states like South Carolina and North Carolina, which already have cable barriers on a lot of their main roads," she said. "The great thing about them, not like concrete barriers, is that they completely absorb all the impact. A lot of cars will just bounce right off of concrete barriers and back into traffic."

State Rep. Barry Fleming, R-Harlem, served as Ms. Newman's mentor for the project. He also suffered a loss when Andrew Hawkinberry, an 8-year-old Harlem boy who attended Mr. Fleming's church, died in a crossover accident in September 2002.

"At that point, I started lobbying the (state) Department of Transportation, asking them to consider cable barriers," he said.

Mr. Fleming's inquiries led to a DOT pilot project and the installation of cable barriers at different locations in the state, including about a 30-mile stretch of I-20 from Ga. Highway 80 to the Richmond County line. That \$3 million project is about 50 percent complete, said Vonda Everett, a spokeswoman for DOT.

Still, Ms. Newman has mixed feelings about the state's new interest in cable barriers.

"I'm excited they are, but I can't help but think about what if," she said, remembering her friend, Mr. Fischer. "If they had been there when he was driving down, he'd still be here."

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Jim Blaylock/Staff

Kim Newman, a senior at Lakeside High School, chose to do her senior research project on cable barriers after her classmate, Tariq Fischer, died in a car accident on Interstate 20.



Jim Blaylock/Staff

Ms. Newman says the use of cable barriers on South and North Carolina roads has lowered the death toll in crossover crashes.

Georgia interstate crossover crashes

Year Crashes Injuries Fatalities

2000	531	365	13
2001	508	424	21
2002	557	364	20
2003	572	407	26

(2004 and 2005 figures not available)

Source: The Georgia Department of Transportation

Newman's senior project research

- North Carolina's crossover crashes have halved annually since the state began installing cable barriers in 1999. On just one 16-mile stretch of North Carolina highway with cable barriers, a crossover death rate of 7.5 annually has been reduced to an average 0.32 crossover deaths a year. An estimated 96 lives were saved from January 1999 to December 2003 - the trial period for the cable barriers - in North Carolina.

- When deaths from crossover crashes in South Carolina increased from 87 to 162 annually, the state decided to install cable barriers. The first contracts were awarded in October 2000. Of 3,000 cable-barrier hits, only 15 crossed the median. Eight of the 15 died.

- Oregon installed cable barriers in March 1998. Fifty-three vehicles came in contact with the cable barriers, but only three broke through. Two of the three did not go into the opposing lanes.

Source: Kim Newman; U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration

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