

Loss of 4 leaves grief, shock: As friends and family recall the wreck victims, some have questions about the police chase.

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Sep. 22--Kathryn D. Morris and Clark A. Nelson were co-workers and friends, en route in a pickup to another pest control job. Morris was on the telephone with her friend, Linda Nelson of Cameron, Mo., sister to her co-worker. William H. Skidmore and T. Jay Wilson were childhood friends who, for reasons still unclear, were fleeing in their Pontiac Grand Prix from a Kearney police cruiser. In a split second, their lives tragically intertwined. About 1 p.m. Wednesday, the eastbound car Skidmore was driving on Route MM slammed into the company truck being driven north by Morris on U.S. 69. Wreckage was strewn across the highway intersection on Lawson's south fringe.

Linda Nelson had heard a noise, and then Morris' cell phone went silent, said family members including Morris' father, John Morris of Cameron. All four were killed. The grief and shock swelled across the Northland on Thursday. "She was my pride and joy," said Morris' grandmother, Wanda Simpson. "She was more like a daughter to me. She's got a little boy, and I don't know what he's going to do."

Morris, 32, lived in Cameron. Her son, Michael, is 12. Howard and Wanda Simpson remembered her as the granddaughter they helped raise, someone always willing to help them on their Cameron farm. Friends and family called her Diane. "She was a good worker and she wasn't afraid of anything," Howard Simpson said. "One time she put some rake teeth on my hay baler and fixed it in about 45 minutes. She would do anything." Morris and Nelson were well-liked by customers and calls of concern came in all day Thursday, said Bill Gimson, owner of Gimson Pest Control Co. in Cameron. A memorial fund for their children is planned, he said. Nelson, 26, grew up in Cameron but most recently lived in Hamilton, Mo. He had a daughter, Emily, 2. "He was a good kid," said friend Amanda Smith of Excelsior Springs. "He had a heart of gold and he cared about everyone around him." Nelson's family said they were too distraught to comment. "It's totally devastating," said Angela Kreps, his stepsister. "Clark and Diane were at the wrong place at the wrong time." The Missouri Highway Patrol is investigating the crash and has not determined how fast the Grand Prix was going when it raced through a stop sign at U.S. 69, said Sgt. Dan Green.

Authorities still don't know why the young men didn't stop for the police car, he said. Skidmore, 23, and Wilson, 25, both lived in Excelsior Springs. William Skidmore remembered his son as a kind, considerate individual who enjoyed being with family and friends.

"My son had one of the biggest hearts for kids -- he loved kids," William Skidmore said Thursday. "He was a good kid." Skidmore was raised in Excelsior Springs by his grandmother. He attended Excelsior Springs High School, where he ran track. As a youth, he had scrapes with the law and dropped out of high school by the 10th grade, his father said. "He began to hang out with the wrong crowd and got into trouble," William Skidmore said. Boxing and track and field helped his son find direction. He later earned a GED and got married.

William Skidmore said his son and Wilson ate dinner at his Excelsior Springs home Tuesday night. The two were lifelong friends. "I feel pretty empty now," Skidmore said of his son's death. "It's hard to say how you feel or how you deal with it. Maybe it hasn't hit me yet. It might hit when I am alone but it helps to have people around you."

William Skidmore said he doesn't understand why police chased his son. "None of them should have died," he said. Wilson's family could not be reached Thursday for comment. Members of the Morris and Nelson families are also upset by the police chase, family members said. "I can't understand why the police did what they did," said Harold Simpson. The chase began after Assistant Police Chief Barney Hatfield responded to a domestic disturbance call in Kearney. The Grand Prix sped away and Hatfield followed on a course that led through Watkins Mill State Park. Kearney Mayor Bill Dane said Thursday that Hatfield followed the Police Department's pursuit policy. Videotape recorded in the police car indicated that the pursuit lasted about 10 minutes and traveled at least 14 miles at excessive speeds, Dane said. The city has asked the Missouri Highway Patrol and the Clay County Sheriff's Department to conduct a review. When the review is completed, dispatch tapes as well as audio and video recorded in the police car will be released, authorities said. Green said the patrol's investigation of the crash could take a month to complete. "The standard operating policy was followed to the letter," Dane said of Hatfield's response to the call. "Why did the car not stop, I can't answer that."

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