

Photo provided

Jake D. Byers works in his grandfather Edward R. Byers' machine shop in Barstow in 2002. Jake Byers died in a traffic collision Saturday.

"He had a smile that could light up a room," said Crystal Santillanes, Byers' 21-year-old sister. "He was a very caring person. He never judged -- he loved everyone."

Byers, of Hinkley, was riding in the bed of a pickup truck driven by his best friend, 19-year-old Kevin Depue, of Barstow, when the truck crashed. The two were on rough off-road terrain in the Stoddard Wells Recreation Area at about 9:49 p.m. Saturday when their vehicle struck a bump. Byers was ejected and sustained fatal injuries.

Depue was arrested and booked at Barstow Sheriff's Office Jail on felony DUI and vehicular manslaughter charges.

Byers had recently completed his sophomore year at Barstow High School. A gifted, self-taught guitarist, he hoped to attend college and study music, his sister said.

"It was his favorite pastime. He would eat and sleep guitar," she said.

Byers liked to perform music ranging from heavy metal to slow ballads, and even composed his own songs.

Besides playing guitar, he also spent time working at his grandfather's business, Edward R. Byers Co. Jacob did machine work and helped build a concrete fence for the company.

"Jake was a real nice kid," grandfather Ed Byers said.

Santillanes said her brother was well-liked.

"He would give his right arm to anybody if they asked for it," she said. "He was the one who made everyone happy. He had many, many friends."

On Monday, some of those friends sought to repay Byers' generosity by raising money to help defray his funeral expenses. Several people went door to door to collect funds and left donation cans at area businesses, Santillanes said.

The family has also set up a memorial fund at Bank of America in Barstow. Contributions may be made by contacting Teller Coordinator Ana Rubio at [256-4512](tel:256-4512).

Santillanes said her family doesn't blame Depue for Byers' death.

"I want people to know that we understand this was an accident, but people need to be careful about drinking and driving," she said. "We know that Kevin loved Jake like a brother."

Byers is also survived by his mother, Tonja C. Byers, his father, Norman A. Byers, and a 17-year-old brother, Edward Byers, in addition to many extended family members.

A memorial service will be held at Hinkley Bible Church, 37313 Hinkley Road, at 11 a.m. on Saturday. A reception at High Desert Estates Recreation Area will follow immediately afterward, relatives said.

Leo Moniz can be reached at leo_moniz@link.freedom.com, or at [256-4105](tel:256-4105).