

THE REGION

Teenager Receives a Fitting Farewell

Al Spellmire of Irvine, who died during a high-desert camping trip, is remembered for his dreams and his love of the outdoors.

By Mai Tran
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A surfboard and favorite beach towel were prominent at the funeral service of an 18-year-old who everyone said had made the most of his short life.

Friends and family gathered Thursday to say goodbye to Alessandro "Al" Spellmire, an outdoor enthusiast who died July 12 during a weekend camping trip with his father to a remote stretch of high desert popular with off-road enthusiasts. It is presumed he died of heat exhaustion.

"To die this young is not fair," the Rev. Steven Sallot told nearly 1,000 mourners who attended the memorial service at St. Cecilia Catholic Church in Tustin, where Spellmire had attended grade school. "Life shouldn't be that way, but it is. He lived it the fullest in the shortest amount of time."

Spellmire, of Irvine, had been planning the desert trip with his father since Christmas, hoping it would be a bonding get-together before he left for college and an opportunity to show his dad his latest hobby: off-road driving.

After getting mired in the sand several times in the desert near Landers, the two became stranded a third time when the oversized tires on Spellmire's Nissan 200SX dug deeply into the sand. The father and son split up to find help. The daytime temperatures were more than 100 degrees, and the two had apparently run out of water.

Jim Spellmire said he later followed his son's footprints and found his lifeless body in the middle of a dirt road. Fellow off-road drivers rescued the father.

San Bernardino County coroner's officials said that although it is thought the young man died of heat exhaustion, an official cause of death will not be known until further tests are performed.

"It's just so sad that he's gone so young and so quick," Jim Spellmire said after the service, as friends hugged him. "There was nothing I could have done differently."

The teen attended elementary school and church with his family at St. Cecilia, graduated in May from Mater Dei High School in Santa Ana and was to begin at Marymount College in Rancho Palos Verdes in September.

Friends said he envisioned himself as an entrepreneur. He wanted a Corvette and a big house in Huntington Beach, where he could surf in the morning and run a surf shop in the afternoon.

"He had lots of dreams, and I think he would've accomplished them all," said Kamy Lucas, 18, a friend. "He was independent and didn't want his parents to buy him anything."

He had earned enough money to afford two cars — the Nissan and a Firebird, which his friends said continually broke down. Another time he saved enough money to buy weights and constructed a makeshift gym in the backyard of the family home.

It was appropriate, friends said, that his memorial wasn't festooned with daisies, carnations or rose stands. Just an old towel and a surfboard, which his pals signed.

"You were the best, man," wrote his friend William James Dalton III. "Someday we'll get to race. Maybe not soon, but someday."

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