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NEWS RELEASE

SOCIOLOGIST INVESTIGATES ROADSIDE MEMORIALS AS A WAY TO GRIEVE

DAYTON, Ohio — Seen most dramatically following Princess Diana's death and in the wake of Sept. 11 at New York City firehouses, the relatively new phenomenon of roadside memorials as a way to express grief has captured the interest of University of Dayton criminologist Art Jipson.

Jipson, assistant professor of sociology, conducted 40 interviews in August and September with family members who are maintaining roadside memorials, generally located where a loved one died in a car accident, he said.

And he's looking for more. "I'm interested in talking to people who are maintaining sites, those who have felt sympathy or empathy for families of loved ones memorialized by the sites and even those who are negative and think roadside memorials are a waste of space," he said.

"I'd also like to talk to those who put up a memorial but then let it go because it was no longer an effective way for them to grieve," he said. From the confidential interviews he's already conducted, he found families that have been maintaining sites for six months to 12 years.

The memorials feature religious symbols including crosses, ranging from small ones nailed to telephone poles to five-foot versions, and stars of David. But he's also seen flowers, notes, poems, letters, clothing, teddy bears and other stuffed animals.

"There is one in North Carolina that, the first time I saw it, took my breath away," he said. "Three small kids and their mother and father were killed. The family put up crosses and flowers and dates and names. They used the car doors from the accident. They decorate it for holidays, with baskets with candy for Easter and a Christmas motif."

He wants to understand why people deal with their grief in this manner. "There's certainly not a right way or wrong way to deal with grief. But these families are feeling a strong enough emotion to break the law and put up a memorial that's a public marker of grief that is

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not in a designated space like a cemetery or park," he said.

Ohio has banned roadside memorials as a hazard to navigation, and other states have highly regulated where memorials can be placed. Jipson will also be surveying law enforcement officials to find out how they enforce the law.

"I got interested in these memorials the same way anyone does," he said. "I was driving down a highway and saw another cross. Now I try not to fly anywhere so I can drive and find roadside memorials."

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