Ghost bikes aim to honor fallen cyclists, raise awareness

By Kevin Clerici

Monday, May 23, 2011

Around the globe, all-white bikes are being chained to street signs near the sites of fatal accidents involving cyclists.

They are called ghost bikes — somber reminders of tragedy and intended as a quiet statement in support of a cyclist's right to safe travel, proponents say.

One of the latest emerged this month on a sidewalk on Telegraph Road in Ventura near where Nick Haverland, 20, was struck and killed by an alleged drunken driver as he was riding to Ventura College.

Like most ghost bikes, the Ventura memorial was installed anonymously and without anyone seeking permission from the grieving family or authorities.

The bike — with handlebars, pedals and wheels intact, but stripped of its cables — was placed within days of Haverland's death on May 11. It was installed among dozens of bouquets of flowers, part of a roadside shrine that has deeply moved Haverland's parents and family, said Ventura Mayor Bill Fulton, a family friend.

"They have been touched by what's been a profound outpouring of support," he said.

The first ghost bikes were created in St. Louis in 2003. The memorials since have appeared in at least 150 locations throughout the world, according to Ghostbikes.org, a website managed by a group of volunteers in New York City that tries to track the sites.

"We know there are many more locations," said Danny Gamboa, 37, a Long Beach-based documentary filmmaker who is making a film on the subject.

In California, there have been 29 cyclist-involved deaths since the beginning of the year, he said.

"That's like one every week and a half," said Gamboa, a cyclist and father who has installed ghost bikes for fallen strangers.

How long the iconic memorials remain in place often depends on the situation and community response. In New York City, where dozens of ghost bikes have been placed, New York's sanitation department proposed removing the memorials, which it called eyesores. In California, it's technically illegal to leave a bike locked to a street sign like the one on Telegraph Road.
Ventura will allow the bike to remain for at least the short term, said Tom Mericle, Ventura's transportation manager and acting city engineer. The city is considering installing a bike bollard at the site. The ghost bike could be locked to it, rather than the street sign. The bollard would be painted white out of respect for the memorial, Mericle said.

As for the long term, it would be up to city leaders, Haverland's parents, Jim and Susan, and the community on how to treat such public displays, he said. Road safety also would be paramount, so it would have to be removed if it were to become an unintended distraction to motorists, Mericle said.

The Haverlands could not be reached for comment for this story.

Gamboa sees the ghost bikes as pieces of art, and believes they can have a profound positive impact as memorials that raise awareness about road safety. He pointed to a ghost bike installed for a 12-year-old girl struck and killed on a street near her home in Compton in Los Angeles. That bike became a rallying point for a grieving community, leading to a large candlelight vigil, new signage and greater communication.

"It's a way for the community to come together and heal," he said. "These are unnecessary deaths."

Two bicyclists have been killed on Ventura County roadways this year, according to the Ventura County Medical Examiner's Office — both by alleged drunken drivers.

A ghost bike was installed for Jose Luis Carmona, 40, of Santa Barbara, who was struck and killed March 5 on the Pacific Coast Highway near Faria Beach Road.

Haverland graduated from Foothill Technology High School in Ventura in 2009 and was remembered by friends and family as a lover of learning and the outdoors. A public memorial will be held for him at 3 p.m. June 5 at Arroyo Verde Park off Day Road in Ventura.

The suspect in his death, Satnam Singh, 49, of Ventura, has pleaded not guilty to all criminal charges.

The death of both bicyclists has hit home with Ventura's close-knit cycling community.

"Nick's death was heartbreaking," said Rachel Morris, an avid cyclist and executive director of Ventura nonprofit group VCCOOL.

Morris sees Haverland's ghost bike as a touching memorial. She hopes it helps reinforce a needed change in culture that fosters mutual respect among all who share the streets.

"We (cyclists) all travel the same unsafe streets and face the same risks. Many of us have those close calls every day," Morris said.

She was among several riders who wore pictures of Haverland pinned to their jackets during last week's annual Ride of Silence, an event held in cities across the country to honor cyclists killed or injured by cars.
Gamboa rejected the suggestion that ghost bikes are installed for notoriety.

"This is not something we like doing," he said. "I hope this is not a trend or a movement. I wish we would never do another one. We hate seeing people die."