Student dies in highway accident

Two other students seriously injured in wreck on way back from debate tournament

by Brian Stoler

Baker College freshman Dan Henning died last night when a van carrying members of the debate team was hit behind by a pickup truck north of Houston on Interstate 45. Henning was 18.

Complete coverage will appear in Friday's Thresher.

Two other students were seriously injured and taken by helicopter to Hermann Memorial Hospital. The students, Hanszen College sophomore Brook Ames and Lovett College senior Michael Erfe, are both in fair condition at the hospital.

Members of the George R. Brown Forensics Society were returning to Rice in two rented vans after they competed in the National Parliamentary Debate Association Championships in Omaha, Neb., on Sunday.

Five passengers suffered less serious injuries, and six other students in the vans were not injured.

The university has notified the families of everyone involved in the accident.

The vans slowed to a stop in traffic while traveling southbound on Interstate 45 just before the intersection with Hardy Toll Road north of Houston. Due to the construction, the freeway was closed down to one lane southbound.

According to Harris County Sheriff's Office reports, at 10:35 p.m. a pickup truck towing a trailer locked its brakes and was unable to stop before striking one of the Rice vans, driven by assistant coach Chris Aspdal and carrying Henning, Ames, Erfe and two other students.

This caused the van to hit the other Rice van, driven by Brown College senior Scott Nilsen and carrying the rest of the team.

At press time it was not known whether criminal charges would be filed against the driver of the pickup truck. Martin Runnels, 43, of Katy.

Ames and Erfe are still being treated at Hermann Hospital.

Ames had surgery today for his broken leg.

Erfe said this afternoon that he has two fractured ribs and his spleen is bleeding. He said doctors believe he will not have to remove his spleen, but they are continuing to monitor him. "I feel really lucky that it wasn't worse for me," Erfe said.

Debate coach Dan West, assistant coach Aspdal and three students were treated at Houston Northwest Medical Center and released early this morning. Henning was dead at the scene of the accident.

Baker College held a private memorial service for Henning at noon today in the college commons. Friends and fellow members of the debate team packed the commons and remembered Henning as an intelligent, well-spoken man who acted as a brother to members of the community. Both President Malcolm Gillis and Vice President for Student Affairs Zenaiof Camacho offered their condolences, as did Baker President Melissa Boddie and Wess College senior Robert Landin, who spoke on behalf of the debate team.

Lindley Doran, director of the Counseling Center said counselors are available to speak with students about the accident. "It's really important for people to debrief about these things, talk about their feelings ... and to try to make sense about something that doesn't make sense," Doran said. The center is available 24 hours a day by telephone at (713) 348-4867.

Counseling Center Associate Director Michael Winters and members of Student Affairs staff visited the team members at Houston Northwest Medical Center last night.

Vice President for Public Affairs Terry Shepard said that Rice began a review of its travel policies after four members of the Prairie View A&M University track team were killed in a van crash Feb. 10. The review is currently pending.

Shepard said the Rice students and coaches were all wearing seat belts. "There are some accidents that can't be prevented by being careful," he said.

Erfe spoke about Henning from his hospital room this afternoon. "It's sad that we lost one of our teammates," he said. "He was one of the most promising freshmen that we had, and he was a really, really nice guy."

Henning is survived by his parents Timothy and Diane Henning, of Vernon Hills, Ill. Arrangements for burial are pending.

Other members of the Thresher editorial staff contributed to this report.