Judgment needed when using photos

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One of the biggest challenges we face many days when planning what will appear on the next day's front page is which photographs best reflect the content or message of the stories we have selected. Sometimes it's an easy choice. A company from outside the area purchases a failed business operation and opens the doors for employment, a photo of celebration with the new owner is a no-brainer. The president announces we're going to war against Iraq, his speech from the Oval Office becomes a historic image. Purdue wins the Big Ten football championship and is headed to Pasadena, the lead photo is going to be the star player prominently holding a rose.

But many of the stories we publish in the center of the front page aren't from events that happened yesterday. These are what we call enterprise projects that look at issues or explore plans for future development or analyze the need for change. These, many times, are stories for which photographs are more difficult to find.

Last Sunday our front page centerpieces addressed the issue of federal highway funding scheduled to be withheld from states that fail to adopt 0.08 percent blood alcohol content as the standard for drunken driving. The story included information about Indiana, which lowered its standard from 0.10 to 0.08 in 2001 after much debate.

We have written numerous stories during the past few years that were detailed and, in some cases, encouraged stricter standards for the enforcement of drunken driving. Sunday's was another good example.

However, we could have made a better choice for the main photograph that accompanied this front-page story. This was one of those stories that was difficult to illustrate with a photograph that was meaningful and relevant. For stories we have run over the years looking at lives lost as a result of drinking and driving, accompanying photographs have been of recent fatal crashes and/or families left behind.

No matter on which side of a data-driven driving crash you might be involved, the event is a tragedy that will change the course of many lives. And the loss is rarely diminished with the passing of time.

The lead photograph for Sunday's drunken driving story had the impact and the message for what would have been appropriate for this subject: a low angle, shooting up toward the cloudy sky of a roadside cross marking the location in which a woman lost her life in a motorcycle crash. Yes, it was a crash and a death that involved drinking and driving. Yes, it drove home the facts contained in the story about the all too often outcome of drunken driving. It clearly illustrated the story's message and the need for tougher laws. But it came up short on sensitivity.

The woman's name was not mentioned in the story, nor was it mentioned in the caption beneath the photo (although her hometown and the fact that she was intoxicated were included). Her name, however, was clearly visible in the photograph, across the white expanse of the homemade cross.

The fatal crash took place just over four years ago. Imagine being the child, or aunt or uncle of this woman and picking up Sunday's newspaper and reliving a moment in time that has taken months and years to understand and eventually to find a way in which to cope. At the very least, we should have contacted the family in advance to discuss our plans before publication.

This isn't to say we should back off our initiative to write about and illustrate the personal tragedies of drinking and driving. But there is a time to let some incidents go, and this should have been one of them.

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