

**T**he day after Christmas 2009, David James DeSignore woke up as he had every morning for 15 years, thinking about rabbits. There were 75 in his backyard, mostly Netherland Dwarfs born under his care, mostly the offspring of offspring of rabbits that he'd acquired over his life of breeding and showing.

DeSignore, who will turn 31 this year, adopted his first rabbit, Oreo, from Prince William Animal Shelter in Manassas, Va., when he was 15. Within a year, he had more than 300 rabbits. He built their cages and kept them in an old barn on his family's small farm. He named every one—300 rabbit names, 300 rabbit name plates. Daisy, a Himalayan, was the first of his rabbits to win Best of Breed, then Best in Show, at a Virginia rabbit competition. DeSignore was 16.

In 2002, he transferred from Northern Virginia Community College to Montana State University in Bozeman to pursue a

degree in animal husbandry. He drove to Montana with three Netherland Dwarfs in the back seat of his car. In 2005, degree in hand, DeSignore moved to Missoula and soon became involved in a 4-H chapter, mentoring kids in rabbit showmanship. He became the president of the Missoula chapter of the American Rabbit Breeders' Association and the supervisor of its youth chapter. He also founded the Treasure State Youth Rabbit and Cavy Club, which today has about 25 members.

That December dawn foretold nothing unusual; just another morning spent tending to Beyonce, Payce, and Picante; Madeline, Mad Mike, and Matilda; and Aires, DeSignore's senior buck, who at the ripe age of 12 still ate and mated, and had lost little of his body condition. The animals were fed, sheltered, warm. For DeSignore there had been many mornings exactly like that morning: rabbits and coffee and some time with his labradoodle, Oliver, all leading to a 15-minute commute from Turah to work at Costco in Missoula. Until December 26, 2009, his life was measured in degrees of normalcy, gauging rabbits.

**A**t 11:30 p.m., the frontage road east of Missoula between the railroad tracks and the Clark Fork River is rurally dark. The area is boxed in to the north and south by Mounts Jumbo and Sentinel, creating Hellgate Canyon. (In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, French trappers called it *Porte de l'Enfer*, because Blackfoot nation warriors used it as an ambush point.) Hellgate Canyon's east entrance begins just after the Thunderbird Motel. The streetlights stop not far beyond there.

About 12 hours earlier that day, DeSignore took a break from the checkout lines at Costco and called Brandon Sorensen, a close friend who had been visiting family in Three Forks for the holidays. Sorensen was due back in Missoula that evening. They made plans to get a drink and exchange gifts.

DeSignore punched out at 6 p.m. He stopped by Quality Supply for some animal feed and headed home, to Turah. He checked on the rabbits, reheated some lobster bisque, turned on *Jurassic Park 3*, and poured himself a glass of wine. Sorensen was due back in town around 9.

DeSignore arrived at the DoubleTree Hotel 20 minutes before Sorensen. In the

bar of the hotel's restaurant, Finn & Porter, the bartender recommended a new merlot from Argentina and they each ordered a glass. They shared a bowl of chowder and a crab cake, and talked about the holidays and their families and when they would open gifts.

Sorensen and DeSignore each drank two glasses of wine before Brad Fredericks, whom Sorensen had invited, arrived. It was Fredericks's 27<sup>th</sup> birthday, and he wanted to celebrate. They all ordered another glass of wine.

By the time they left Finn & Porter, DeSignore had drunk four glasses of Argentine merlot. "It was the holidays," he says. "We were celebrating Brad's birthday—I didn't really think about it."

Sorensen and Fredericks headed to Al & Vic's, a bar on the north end of downtown with pool tables that ate quarters and a jukebox with Robert Earle Keene and Van Halen.

DeSignore followed in his truck, a 1999, champagne-colored Chevy Silverado. He remembers arriving at Al & Vic's needing a glass of water, but found his friends had ordered him a Long

# THE RECKONING

DAVID DELSIGNORE WOULDN'T HURT A SOUL. AND THEN HE DID.

story by Jamie Rogers • photos by Chad Harder



David DeSignore in his Deer Lodge cell.



A photo of Ashlee Patenaude and Taylor Cearley on the Highway 200 roadside memorial.

Island iced tea, the sweating glass already on the table. DelSignore says he didn't want to drink it but his friends chided him; they called him a pussy. He drank it all, and told them he needed to go home. It was cold outside. He wanted to check on his rabbits. He left just after 11:30 p.m.

As he drove down East Broadway, the gape of Hellgate Canyon looming, he called a friend whose family he'd spent Christmas Day with. Though it would later be a matter of dispute, he remembers hanging up before his truck passed the Thunderbird Motel.

Soon after, DelSignore says, he felt his truck roll over a rumble strip, though there is no rumble strip on that section of road. What he may have felt was the graveled shoulder, which separated the asphalt from a patch of frozen grass and a steep bank that drops toward the river. He doesn't recall an impact. What made him stop was the screaming.

"I reversed my truck," he remembers. "I see one girl just running up and down the side of the street. As soon as I get out, I hear her yelling, 'You killed my friends, you killed my friends!'"

DelSignore got out of the truck. He saw three girls lying motionless on the side of the road.

He called Sorensen—no answer. He called Fredericks—no answer. Then he called 911.

One of the girls started moving. DelSignore carried her to his truck, sat her up in the passenger's seat, and turned up the cab's heat. "She was shaking," he says. "She had blood on her. I thought she was going into shock, so I told her friend to stay with her—to try to keep her awake."

DelSignore returned to the two girls who were still lying motionless. One was wearing shorts and a sweatshirt. Both had blood on their faces. Their shoes were knocked off their feet.

He tried to warm them, rubbing their shoulders and arms with his hands. He was crying.

The fire trucks showed up first, then the ambulances and the troopers and the sheriff's deputies. DelSignore was taken to St. Patrick Hospital for blood work before being taken back to the scene of the accident, where he saw a girl being lifted into the back of an ambulance.

A highway patrolman asked if he knew what had happened. DelSignore said he didn't want to know. The officer told him two of the girls, Ashlee Patenaude and Taylor Cearley, were dead and their friend, Teal Packard, was severely injured.

DelSignore submitted to a Breathalyzer. He blew a .147. The legal limit is .08, a little more than half that.

Two days later, a photograph of DelSignore dominated the front page of *The Missoulian*. His eyes looked small, eclipsed from below by dark, swollen bags. His head was tilted awkwardly, as if it were too heavy. He was biting his lower lip and wearing bright orange jail coveralls, the sagging V-neck exposing a wedge of hairless chest.

On December 31, DelSignore was released from Missoula County Jail on his own recognizance. Sorensen arrived that morning with a promissory note stating that if DelSignore ran, Sorensen and five others (including each of their parents) would pay the \$120,000 bail.

DelSignore hadn't slept in days. He'd barely been able to eat. He'd also been denied the prescription drugs Flexeril and Gabapentin, which he took for severe back pain stemming from an injury he'd suffered at Costco in 2005. "He looked so pale," Sorensen says. "He was lost."

On New Year's Day, Wendy McDaniel, to whom DelSignore had grown close in 4-H, took him to breakfast along with her family. They ate at Paul's Pancake Parlor, a diner with a mural of the University of

Montana football stadium. It was the first time he'd been out in public since the accident, and though he wore a hoodie and dark sunglasses, a man in the restaurant recognized him. "I could hear him say to his friend, 'I can't believe they just let people like that walk the streets.' I felt sick."

Nine months later, DelSignore addressed a crowded room in Missoula District Court. He wore a black suit and gray tie. His voice trembled as he spoke over a broken din of sobs from the audience: "There is nothing I can say or do to bring these girls back. That is my own fault. I can't bring your girls back—I can't. I can't apologize enough to anyone here.

"I do deserve to be punished. My family has stood by my side. I have brought so much shame to them. They raised me to make better decisions. I don't want any harm to come to them for standing by my side.

"I'm not going to beg for mercy. Allow the community and families to

receive peace of mind knowing that the person that caused so much devastation is going away."

The hearing was the final scene in a narrative that galvanized Missoula, where DelSignore's story seemed the final straw in a stack of headline tragedies. There was the March 2009 incident, where an off-duty bartender collided head-on with a Montana Highway Patrol trooper, killing them both. Then, in August of that year, State Sen. Greg Barkus steered his powerboat onto a rocky shoreline on Flathead Lake. Among the four injured were U.S. Congressman Denny Rehberg and two of his staffers, one of whom was in a coma for more than a week after the accident.

But DelSignore was not an unraveling alcoholic or an influential politician. He was a man who lived by means and ends that fit neatly and quietly into society. He was the proverbial Everyman.

"He's the ultimate cautionary tale," said Gwen Florio, a reporter who covered the case for the *Missoulian*.

On the one-year anniversary of the accident, the *Missoulian* ran an article with the headline "Families struggling to cope a year after drunken driver killed 2 girls, injured 2 others." It quotes family members, friends, and a Hellgate High School freshmen basketball coach, Phil McLendon, who said, "I still think about those girls all the time. I have their families in my prayers and thoughts." The same day the paper ran an editorial that used the story of the accident as a lead-in to a discussion of the state legislature's obligation to pass more stringent DUI laws:

"It is the *Missoulian* editorial board's fervent wish that the shock and pain and grief that swept through our community as news of the senseless tragedy spread—the same hurt experienced by everyone, at one time or another, who has ever had the misfortune of being touched by the devastation wreaked by drunken driving—will not be for nothing."

For a year, DelSignore's story was the sort of news that highlights political,



social, and moral divisions in an otherwise homogenous community. The catharsis of these divisions could be tracked on Missoulian.com comments, where the tone sometimes was like a boisterous town hall meeting: "What were these girls doing walking along Highway 200?" "David should rot in prison." "Maybe it's time to build some streetlights."

The anniversary story and accompanying editorial marked the last time DelSignore's name was published in the paper until Feb. 11, 2011, when the *Missoulian* ran this headline: "Missoula mother of fatal DUI victim pleads guilty to reckless driving." The brief article cited the outcome of an Oct. 17, 2009, incident where Shawna Cearley was charged with driving under the influence of alcohol and possessing an open container while traveling down the same road where her daughter was killed two months later. Missoulian.com did not allow comments on the story.

Between the date of his release from county jail and his sentencing hearing nine months later, DelSignore was permitted to live his life with relatively few stipulations. The judge had required that he routinely blow into a Breathalyzer, which remotely sent BAC scores to his bondsman, and that he find a new job; he'd been fired from Costco.

The Breathalyzer was easy. Even without a court order forbidding him from drinking, DelSignore says he "will never touch alcohol again." Finding work, however, proved more difficult, and it wasn't until early May that Nancy Larson and Lindsey Irwin, the mother-daughter owners of the Bitterroot Flower Shop, hired him as a part-time sales clerk. "Our main concern was that he was very over-qualified for the job," Irwin says. "We had no idea he was involved [in the accident]."

A few days after he began work, DelSignore asked Irwin, Larson, and a few others to meet him in the alley behind the shop. "He was crying when he told us," says Irwin. "He said that if we felt he was a detriment to our business, he would understand." Irwin and Larson, whose shop prepared flower arrangements for the victims' funerals, briefly deliberated about the hire before deciding that DelSignore already had become too valuable a member of the team to consider letting him go.

"He just wanted to be as regular as possible," Irwin says. Larson added, "Our only worry was compensating him enough for all the extra work he was doing."

During DelSignore's first few weeks at the shop, he took each of the other 15 employees aside and told them about the accident. They were understanding. "They were always asking me to go out, and I was always saying no," he says.

DelSignore enjoyed the work, and according to his employers, customers appreciated his disposition, attention to detail, and professionalism. "People would come in and ask to work with



working. DelSignore recognized her from a court hearing. They made eye contact and she immediately left.

Head west from the lone stoplight in downtown Deer Lodge and the road climbs softly into the foothills of the

DelSignore's home. Recently, five months into his sentence and 40 pounds lighter than when he arrived, he explained that his days have been spent making planters out of recycled license plates and scrap wood. The project is part of an initiative with the slogan "Healthy Mind, Healthy Body," and is the brainchild of Montana's

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Dave. We don't get that very often," Larson says.

That summer, DelSignore's face and name repeatedly appeared on the front page of the paper, but only once did his presence have a negative impact at the flower shop, when a member of Ashlee Patenaude's family came in while he was

Flint Creek Mountains. From the top of the bench you can see across a narrow valley to the crest of another bench. This is grassland, pastureland, windswept and sullen below the mountains.

In the cradle of that narrow valley sits the 68-acre footprint of the Montana State Prison double fence that surrounds

First Lady, Nancy Schweitzer. Eventually, some 4,000 planters will be distributed to fourth graders across Montana. DelSignore is glad to have something to keep him busy. He makes 31 cents an hour, most of which goes toward restitution to the victims' families.

A month before the sentencing hearing, Paul Sells, a licensed clinical social worker, sent an evaluation of DelSignore to Cathy Dorle, the Missoula Department of Corrections Parole and Probation officer assigned to the case. In the evaluation, Sells wrote, "Somewhat amazingly to me from all the information I can gather, and which I believe to be reliable, Mr. DelSignore does *not* have a pattern of alcohol or substance abuse... [He] has had tremendous remorse over his part in this incident, has *never* shied away from taking ownership for this terrible choice to get behind the wheel of his vehicle that night, and has stated convincingly more than once 'I'll never drink again... I deserve to be punished.'"

Two weeks earlier Sells had written to Morgan Modine, DelSignore's attorney. In the letter, Sells iterates the depth of DelSignore's remorse and the fact that, until the accident, he'd been an upstanding member of the community.

DelSignore had pleaded guilty to two counts of negligent homicide and one count of negligent assault. At the October 8 hearing, Judge John Larson

invited comments before he announced his sentence. Among those who spoke on the victims' behalf was Ashlee Patenaude's mother, Jenipher, who addressed DelSignore directly:

"You chose to get behind the wheel of that vehicle. You chose to talk on your cell phone or text or whatever you were doing and you ruined our lives... They were great girls and you ruined every single one of their lives. I can't forgive you and I won't. No matter how much time you have to serve, it will never be enough. I have an urn sitting in my living room. I have them in my head and in my heart and it's not good enough for me and you did that to me. I want you to suffer."

Several of the other parents and friends of the victims also spoke. DelSignore cried continually, but never lowered his head.

"I wanted to show them that I take responsibility," he explained.

After more than two hours of testimony, Judge Larson asked the mothers of the two dead girls to stand and state the ages of their daughters.

"Fourteen," Jenipher Patenaude said.

"Fifteen," Shawna Cearley said.

Larson sentenced DelSignore to 30 years at Montana State Prison with 14 years and seven months of that time suspended.

DelSignore keeps a collection of pictures in his prison cell. Pictures of his parents, who still live in Virginia; of his brother and sister, who live in Colorado Springs; of his friends back in Missoula. He has a picture of Oliver the labradoodle, and his rabbits.

"They all have different homes now," he says. Some of his Jersey Woolys and Netherland Dwarfs went to live in Spokane, with a family he'd met at a rabbit show there. A few live with friends in Missoula, but most of them, along with Oliver, live in Potomac with Wendy McDaniel and her family, who send DelSignore pictures of the rabbits. "A lot of guys here think it's weird," he says, referring to his fellow inmates, "but I love getting the pictures. My animals have a good home there."

DelSignore says he thinks about the accident. He says there are good days, when he feels motivated, eager to improve. And there are bad days, when he can't get out of bed, and everything seems to make him cry. "Every day I am ashamed of what I've done to these families. I didn't want any of this. I don't think it's anyone's intention to get into a vehicle and... I accept the fact that I'm here in prison."

Two benches sit at the accident site, perched atop a high bank overlooking a slow bend in the Clark Fork. "Ashlee Renee Patenaude" and "Taylor Lee Cearley" are burned into the wood, a name for each bench. Between the benches is a waist-high pedestal cobbled together with river stones, rings,



David DelSignore in the prison print shop.



David DelSignore holds a photo of a rabbit in his cell.

bracelets, and charms embedded in the mortar. One charm says "Love." Another says "Peace." On top of the pedestal is a color picture of the girls. Their eyes are the same arresting shade of blue. They stare directly at the camera. Flanking the photograph, chiseled into stone, are their birth dates: Ashlee, January 10, 1995; Taylor, July 14, 1994. Following each birthdate is a dash and another date: December 26, 2009.

At night, two newly installed streetlights cast an orbital glow.

Between the accident and his sentencing, DelSignore avoided the stretch of road that passes through Hellgate Canyon. He says before he was sent to Deer Lodge he never visited the memori-

al, out of respect for the families. He hopes they will one day forgive him, but he knows, if it happens at all, that it will take time.

Letters help. From DelSignore's family, his co-workers at the flower shop, the McDaniel family, and from Kamrie White, who sends him a letter nearly every day.

Kamrie is 15, a sophomore in high school. DelSignore had mentored her in the 4-H program, showed her how to care for and handle her sable-colored Holland Lop, a breed of rabbit with floppy ears and seemingly too much flesh and fur for its small, roundish frame.


Kamrie hosts a website at [springfever-hollands.com](http://springfever-hollands.com). Under the "About Us" tab, she writes, "I started out with my first rabbit Peanut Butter from Jennie Webb at 10 years old. After awhile you could say I got the 'bunny fever' and ended up with 20! I am now 15 years old and am raising and showing quality, pedigreed, Holland Lops. Thanks to all my great friends I have met." Among those who she thanks are David DelSignore.

In August, two months before the sentencing, DelSignore joined Kamrie and her family at the Missoula County Fair, where Kamrie was showing her rabbit. Before Holland Lops were called, DelSignore took her aside and gave her a final tip: "If you have confidence in your animal, if you believe in it," he said, "then the judges will see that, and you will do well."

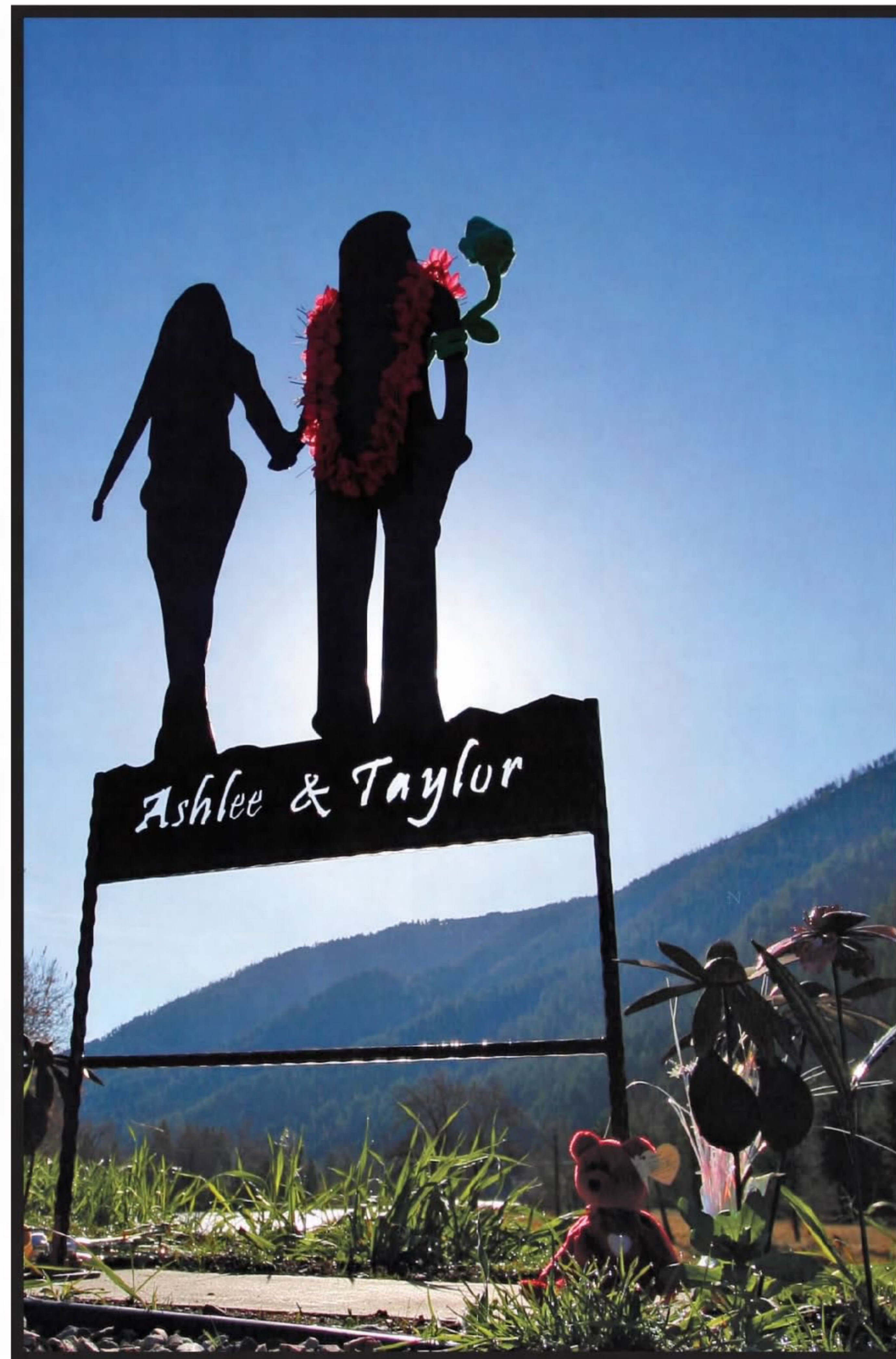
That rabbit show would be his last before DelSignore went to prison. He plans to return to the circuit after his release, but just when that will be is uncertain. In 2014 he'll be eligible for parole, and though he thinks about life after prison often, he says, he isn't ready to get his hopes up.

Part of his release will be obligatory speaking engagements, educating kids on the dangers of drunken driving. "I'm eager to turn this situation into something positive for someone else," he says.

Something positive like the memory of his last rabbit show.

Kamrie won Grand Rabbit. 

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