

Kevin Maras remembered by local drag racing community

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From first appearances, things seemed perfectly normal when the local drag racing contingent gathered for another night of straight-line competition at New York International Raceway Park last Friday. The 1988 Mustang that had been driven so often down the dragstrip in past years by the late Kevin Maras was once again traveling down the strip, a very familiar sight.

This time, however, due to recent tragic circumstances, it was not Kevin Maras behind the wheel Friday. It was his nephew, Zach Maras, who was performing a tribute run in honor of his fallen uncle Kevin, 50, who died in a highway accident near Lake Placid on Aug. 17. Kevin's wife and two daughters survived the accident. The Maras family is from Grand Island.

The grieving local drag racing community held a fundraiser and tribute night Friday at NYIRP to honor Kevin and to show support for his family. The night was emotional but at the same time helped in the very difficult healing process.

Retired drag racer Bill Fritzke of North Tonawanda was good friends with Kevin and helped to spearhead the evening's events. "I raced extensively at Lancaster for probably about 15 or 16 years until I retired in 2012," Fritzke said. "I originally met Kevin at the track, and we started helping each other, and that's how our friendship started from there. We pitted next to each other. It just stayed that way. "Neither one of us raced for the past five years or so but we always kept in touch. It wasn't every day but every few weeks we'd catch up on the phone or we'd throw a text here and there." Fritzke says the fundraiser and the tribute were successful at the track, formerly known as Lancaster Speedway.

"I was on vacation when I got the news of Kevin's passing, and I just thought that we needed to help his family out and remember Kevin," Fritzke said. "The family does and will have a great many things to deal with going forward. It's just something that the racing community always does in times like this. In the event of someone passing away or gets injured or sick, everybody comes together to try to help out with things.

"I got ahold of Sharon (Hughes-NYIRP drag racing director) and it just kind of grew from there. People just started getting ahold of me and telling me they were collecting things, and it was a joint effort among a lot of many caring people. It turned out to have a real good turnout, and a lot of people really liked the way things went with Kevin's car being there. The car and Kevin were a staple there for many years." Hughes was touched by the outpouring of support for the Maras family.

"Kevin will always be remembered as a true gentleman," Hughes said. "He was a quiet, soft-spoken guy but he went out of his way to help everybody and was genuinely happy for whoever won a race, I believe, whether it was him or not. He drove a stick-shift car, which is a little more challenging to be consistent when you're bracket racing. He hasn't been out at the track a lot the last few years but he was working on his car and planning to come back out racing. At the track Friday, it was very emotional when Kevin's nephew, Zach, drove his car down the track. It was a very emotional moment for everyone there.

"It was very heartwarming to see how generous our racers are. Friday's events were put together at the very last minute mainly by Bill Fritzke. It was great to see all the donations and also how generous everybody was with helping out his family. The drag racers at Lancaster are a big family as well. They've proven that again."

Former track drag racing director and current tech inspector Gary Westfall remembered Maras.

"I called him the happy drag racer," Westfall said. "Win or lose, he never complained about anything. His car was clean and professional. He drove his car out to the track and raced it. Stick-shift cars are known to break because of the high rev in the engine. Yet he drove over 100,000 miles on the original factory clutch and drag raced it. So he ran the car hard but he didn't beat it up, and he made the parts last. As far as a person, I wish we had another 200 racers at the track just like Kevin. He will be remembered."