

Crash kills pizzamaker and his son

Friends open his store, hoping to keep the business viable.

By **Ralph Montano**
BEE STAFF WRITER

Cheer's Gourmet Pizza opened Thursday, but its owner, Aram Stepanyan, wasn't the one who unlocked the door.

His friends were. They knew how hard the Armenian immigrant worked. They knew his family needed their help. And this was the only way they could show how much he meant to them, how much they will miss him.

Stepanyan and his 14-year-old son, Arthur, were heading home on Highway 50 Wednesday night when their car crashed, killing both.

Matthew Phillips, who owns the mobile phone business next door in the small strip mall on Folsom's East Bidwell Street, said he lost the best neighbor he ever had.

"He treated my kids like they were his own," said a grief-stricken Phillips. "And nobody from my store could ever buy pizza from him because it was always free. He wouldn't take our money."

Stepanyan, 40, was one of those people who always was friendly, who always wore a smile, even when circumstances would have justified some-

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thing else. Stepanyan emigrated from Armenia in 1994. He got a job selling pizzas, and after about three years he took a chance and opened his own pizzeria.

In 1998, he spoke to The Bee about how the struggle to get his family off welfare with his own business.

"Maybe a year, maybe tomorrow, you just get a little more business," he told The Bee. "I never like somebody else taking care of my family. That's why I work hard, hard, hard."

Phillips said he's never seen anybody work harder. The jovial, barrel-chested owner arrived at 9 a.m. and didn't leave until 10 p.m. "He had a bed in the back so he could go back there and take a nap."

The ritual was played out every day but Sunday, when he went to church with his family.

Stepanyan's wife, Alvina, and three children often joined him at the store, Phillips said.

Even with the long hours, Stepanyan's spirits were always high, said Hao Dang, owner of Silky Nails, two doors down.

"He joked about one day coming in and having a pedicure," Dang said. Stepanyan and his son both loved cars and spent a lot of time admiring the fancy ones that would pass by or pull into the parking lot, he said.

Father and son were heading to their Rancho Cordova home when the Highway 50 crash occurred shortly after 10 p.m. Arthur helped his father at the store that day, then went bowling

down the street at Lake Bowl. Stepanyan was in his 1995 Toyota sedan traveling about 65 mph, said California Highway Patrol Officer Don Oxley, and was unaware of two minor traffic collisions that had stopped traffic near the Sunrise Boulevard off-ramp.

"He swerved to the right to avoid the other collision in front of him, then over-corrected and lost control," spinning into a Ford Explorer involved in an earlier crash, Oxley said.

The Stepanyans were wearing seat belts, but paramedics said Arthur died at the scene from his injuries. Stepanyan was pronounced dead at UC Davis Medical Center.

Kevin Aslanian, executive director of the Coalition of California Welfare Rights Organizations, introduced The Bee to Stepanyan and his plight. Aslanian said the pizzamaker got his family off welfare more than a year ago.

"He was a success and was living his dream. It is a great loss to our community," said Aslanian, who also is Armenian.

Friends said Stepanyan shared his success with others. He sponsored teams in the local soccer league and provided pizza to many groups and functions at his church, Emmanuel Armenian Pentecostal Church.

Two members of the church, Edik Yapiskoposyan and Khachik Yarpetyan, appeared somber as they arrived at Stepanyan's pizza shop Thursday afternoon.

They opened the business, say-

ing they were there to help the family. Phillips said he would offer to pitch in as well.

"I've worked pizza before and I'll do it again if they want me to," he said.

Pastor Rubik Kazaryan said the family wishes to keep the business going if they can.

Meanwhile, some students at Cordova High were mourning the loss of a friend.

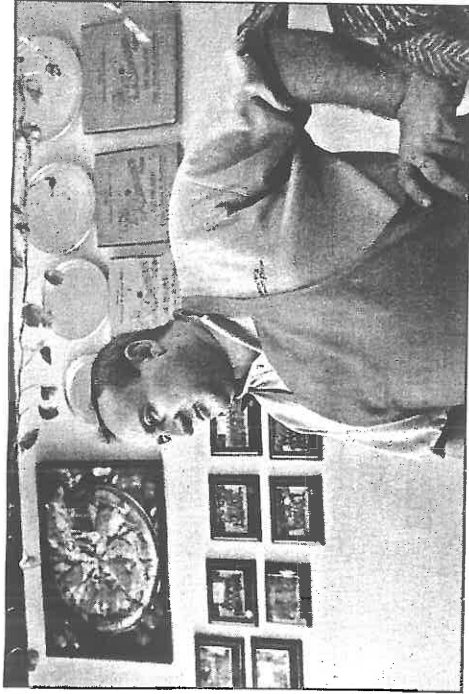
Principal DeAnn Kamilos said Arthur, a sophomore, told a counselor he was very close to his father and admired him for starting his own business.

"One of his friends just told me

as he was leaving school, 'I just can't believe it. I keep thinking he's going to be here tomorrow,'" Kamilos said.

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In this August 1998 picture, Aram Stepanyan chats inside his pizza shop on Folsom's East Bidwell Street. He and his 14-year-old son were killed on Wednesday night. Thursday, friends of his opened his business to help his family.

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