



Friends, witnesses heartbroken after Sarasota crash kills 3 teens

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Singer Lukas James, 17, says he wrote a song last year about his friendship with Isabella Paoletta, 15, who died in the crash along with Oscar, 19, and David Flores, 17.

SARASOTA — Isabella Paoletta had a rare sense of humor that could bring even the quietest person out of their shell, a friend said Thursday.

Lukas James, a former competitor on the ABC show, “Boy Band,” said Paoletta’s personality was “one in thousands.” He was heartbroken when he learned Paoletta was killed Wednesday along with two of her friends, in a fiery crash on the John Ringling Bridge.

“She would say something incredibly quirky that no one would think about,” James said. “Like the weirdest person on the planet, but she made it charming and cute. She was quirky cute and it was rare humor. She made people laugh no matter what. She would bring a geek out of his nest.”

James, two years Paoletta’s senior, had met her in school.

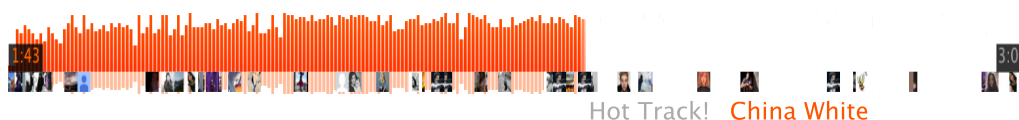
The friends had grown apart recently, and he was trying to reconnect with her. Then his brother came into his room Wednesday morning and told him, “Bella died last night.”

“Obviously I freaked out,” James said. “I woke up from a sleep and I was just shocked.”

Nine months earlier, James released his first single, “Feeling Now,” about his love for her. He said they had great times together.

[Lukas James](#)

Feeling Now

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Like the lyrics to his song, James said the loss of his friend at a young age is tearing him apart.

Tragedy can happen at anytime, he said. He comforted friends and laid flowers at a makeshift memorial on the John Ringling Causeway, where he saw the mother of the two brothers who died in the accident, Oscar and Daniel Flores.

“I saw their mom crying,” James said. “It was sad, horrible.”

James exchanged text messages with Paoletta’s mother, offering his condolences and remembering the girl he says always “meant well.”

James plans to remember Paoletta in a new song.

“It’s tough for everybody,” he said. “It’s a close community and she was really popular. She was beautiful. It’s sad to see young people go.”

Police seeking evidence

The Sarasota Police Department is still investigating the cause of the crash that occurred at about 12:20 a.m. Wednesday just east of the entrance to Bird Key Park on the John Ringling Causeway.

Joe Abel, a security guard changing shifts that morning at Bird Key Drive, heard a “pop” that sounded like a gunshot while he and his replacement stood inside the guard shack. They initially dismissed the sound of the explosive collision.

“As I was leaving to go home,” said Abel, “I turned on John Ringling and saw the car engulfed in flames. It was something straight out of a movie. I saw a body laying there 30 feet from the car. There was a police guy there yelling, ‘Everyone get back, everyone get back.’ He thought the car was going to explode more.

“It was a horrific sight. I knew if there was anyone in that car, they were gone.”

A police report indicated that just after midnight, the Flores brothers and Paoletta were traveling in a four-door sedan westbound across the John Ringling Bridge when, for unknown reasons, the driver lost control of the car, struck the sidewall of the bridge, a tree, and at some point, Paoletta was ejected from the car.

The vehicle caught fire and was extinguished by the Sarasota County Fire Department. The brothers were found dead inside the car.

According to the report, officers at the scene did not know who had been driving.

Abel said it took 10 minutes before the fire department arrived and rescuers could reach Paoletta.

“It was fully engulfed,” he said. “It was hard to see around it because the flames were so bright and so high. It was horrific. There was debris everywhere.”

Memories of the scene are haunting Abel, who says he felt helpless watching the car burn.

“When I read that they were all young, it hit me hard,” he said. “It’s crazy, I see people speeding up and down John Ringling Boulevard right there. I saw someone popping a wheelie.”

“This one is going to stick in my mind a while. My thoughts and prayers go out to the youngsters’ families. May they rest in peace.”