

A car crash, a death, where lives intersect

Early on, a child's safety goes out of his mom's hands

BY SANDRA R. WOLKOFF

The story of another mother whose irresponsible drinking allegedly caused the death of a child was all over the TV two weeks ago.

The police said a woman from the Bronx had crashed her car on the West Side Highway with her daughter and six other young girls on board. An 11-year-old friend of her daughter's, Leandra Rosado, was killed. They all had been at a birthday party and were heading to the woman's house for a sleepover.

That any parent would put her own child in danger so recklessly and impulsively is frightening. Witnesses said her toddler's father had tried to stop her from driving and removed his own son from the car, giving us some insight into how scared he was. But still she drove away with the other children. Nobody pulled any of them, or their driver, out of the car. It makes the children's parents and guardians look inexplicably helpless.

Sadly, death by car is something I now know. My son, Steven, was killed as a result of a car accident last year. An unlicensed 21-year-old driver, with narcotics in his blood and cans of beer littering his vehicle, according to the San Mateo County coroner and the California Highway Patrol, drove a car borrowed from a relative. Weaving impatiently in slow weekend traffic on a beautiful afternoon in Northern California, he hit one car, and then a second car in which my 30-year-old son was a passenger.

The driver, estimated to have been speeding at about 85 miles an hour, was killed instantly, my son died more slowly at the scene. The accident left my son's girlfriend with traumatic and life-changing injuries and the subsequent six-car accident left many hurt and shaken.



Steven Wolkoff and his parents, Sandra and Jerry, circa 1978

I suspect that the family member who gave this driver the car knew of his drug problem — it is believed to have been a long-standing issue — and certainly she must have known that this young man was unlicensed.

As a social worker, I have spoken to many parent groups over the years, long before this happened, and often shared the lesson I learned when Steven started kindergarten. I realized, standing at the bus stop the very first day of school, that he would become less and less dependent on me to keep him safe, and much more dependent on others.

The same thought hit me when the soccer coach said, "Don't worry, you can leave, he'll be fine" — and the first time my son climbed into someone else's car to go off to a playdate.

My children's safety was predicated on the good actions of my neighbors and their children. Forays to the mall, the nighttime basketball games at local parks, hot summer days at Jones Beach, would bring all our children together; we had to count on each of them. We had to count on adults to drive them back home safely.

At college, at clubs, on poorly lit highways, our children's lives would intersect — in fun, in peace, at work, in love and frighteningly, for thousands of young people each year, in death.

For my children to be safe, I would tell my listeners, I need your children to be healthy. I need you, their parents, to care about what they do, and whom it will impact. My safety and my children's safety depend on the choices that you and your children make. Every time a family member, a friend, a stranger, looks away when he has knowledge of a drunk or impaired driver, someone's life is in danger.

I don't assume that the mother of the thoughtless, careless young man who drove his car as if it were a murder weapon, cries any less than I do; she lost her son, too. But this tragedy didn't have to happen.

No child should end life alone under a tarp on a highway. June 21, 2008, was my son's turn. Oct. 11 was Leandra Rosado's. Tomorrow it could be a child of yours.



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