

HIT & RUN

THE DRIVERS, THEIR VICTIMS AND ONE LOOPHOLE IN THE LAW

BY BILL JENSEN



Nine-year-old Messiah Lovelady was killed by a hit-and-run driver in May, 2004.

For weeks after his son Messiah was killed while crossing a street in Wyandanch, Douglas Lovelady squinted through the windshield at every light-colored minivan that crossed his path, wondering if that was the vehicle that killed his 9-year-old son.

For Anthony Savarese, it was every dark-colored sedan, his eyes darting to the grill in hopes of finding the telltale front-end damage that resulted from the impact of striking and killing his 14-year-old daughter Jessica on a road in Franklin Square.

In a hit-and-run crime, you don't have a face to hate. Four wheels and an engine become your boogeyman.

Last year, three children were killed by hit-and-run drivers on the roads of Long Island. Only one arrest has been made.

The nature of the crime implies speed, blink-of-an-eye action that renders eyewitness accounts shaky at best. In Messiah's case, he was killed by a light blue or green or champagne-colored van. With Jessica, it was just a large dark car. No one saw the license plate number. No one saw the driver.

Often the only clues are the remnants that break off from the car after it hits flesh. And for detectives, that is sometimes all they've got. For Messiah, pieces of a front grill and amber lens from the passenger-side turning

signal/parking lamp point to a 1991-95 Chrysler/Plymouth/Dodge minivan. There are about 15,000 of these vans in western Suffolk/eastern Nassau alone. For Jessica, a piece of a headlight points to a 1989-91 Ford Taurus. There are more than 10,000 Ford Tauruses in Nassau and Queens.

At least it's something.

In a study published in 2003 by the National Center For Statistics and Analysis and sponsored by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 18 percent of pedestrian fatalities in single-vehicle crashes from 1998 to 2001 were hit-and-run. In 2001, 4,882 pedestrians were struck and killed, 781 the result of a hit-and-run. You can see a running tally of hit-and-run victims in the United States on websites like www.deadlyroads.com. Some days, there have been three, four, five people left dying on a road as a car drove away into the horizon. The variety of the victims, as well as the variety of the drivers (when they're caught), illustrates that this is a crime that can happen to anyone who crosses a street or gets in a car.

MESSIAH AND HIS SNACKS

Messiah Lovelady made everyone smile. Bursting with energy while still respectful of his elders, the third-grader at Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School shared a room at home with his two brothers, Aquines, 11, and Christopher, 14. At 4:45 p.m. on May 12, Messiah and Aquines were walking home from Pete's Deli, where Messiah had purchased \$2.25 worth of cakes and cookies.

One block away from the crosswalk on Straight Path Road, a four-lane road with a 40 mph speed limit, the two decided to cross.

"[Police] said the light must have been green," says Douglas Lovelady. Two vehicles were traveling in the left lane, going north, as the two crossed from east to west. The first vehicle stopped short when the driver saw

the two boys. Seeing the brake lights of the vehicle in front of it, the second driver swerved into the right lane and struck Messiah.

Witnesses say the van made no attempt to stop and there were no skid marks at the point of impact. The van then made several turns, as if trying to evade capture.

Just like that, a little boy gone. A happy boy, excited about digging into his snacks. Replaced by some bits of plastic on the street.

Aquines ran to his house and got his mother. Douglas Lovelady arrived at the scene as they were putting Messiah in the ambulance.

Witnesses, including a man outside the deli, a homeless woman and Aquines, all gave varying accounts of the van's color.

"There's usually some transfer of paint to the clothing [of the victim]," says Suffolk County First Squad Detective Sgt. Kenneth Williams. "This time, there was not."

Williams has been in touch with numerous auto repair dealers, sending out bulletins to be on the lookout for a light-colored Plymouth Voyager. He says he received many leads immediately after the incident, but all went nowhere.

Auto body shops are often the last line of defense for catching hit-and-run drivers. That's how the suspect in the most recent hit-and-run fatality of a child on Long Island was caught. On Oct. 23, Karin Chirichella, 43, of East Northport, dropped off her 2000 black Suzuki Gran Vitari at Fairfield Auto Collision in Huntington Station, claiming she hit a tree on her way home from a restaurant. The owner of the shop, Mark Dammer, noticed the irregular damage and telephoned Suffolk police, who had put out a Crime Stoppers bulletin describing a dark pickup or SUV which had struck and killed 14-year-old Charles McAuliffe as he rode his bike on a Greenlawn street a week earlier. Dammer said he called the police, "not thinking it was the car," but his hunch paid off. Dammer says