

LOCAL NEWS



STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE/BILL LYONS

A car speeds by the "Ghost Bike" memorial to Ronald (RJ) Tillman on Howard Avenue.

A crime unsolved, a community united

One year later, the hit-run death of a biking Wagner College student resonates on and off campus

By JOHN ANNESE
STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE

A year later, police still haven't found the hit-and-run driver who killed Wagner College nursing student Ronald (RJ) Tillman.

But the college community says it's turned the tragedy into a rallying point for change.

Tillman's death spurred Wagner to set up a memorial scholarship and, notably, start a traffic safety campaign that pressured the city to install a traffic signal at the intersection of Howard and Hillside avenues and repaint the lines along the road.

Tillman, who was 29, was biking along the snaking Howard Avenue at about 9:13 p.m. Feb. 12, 2012, on his way home to Westerleigh, when an SUV driver slammed into him between Highland and Grand avenues, hard enough to dislodge the vehicle's grille, then fled.

"It hurts as much today as the day it happened," said Tillman's mother, Nancy. "It's heartbreaking."

Despite the road's many curves, motorists often barrel along Howard Avenue. The night of the crash, several drivers tried to pass through the scene, oblivious to the road flares placed by

police. A month later, when a group dedicated a "Ghost Bike" memorial on Howard in Tillman's honor, speeding motorists blew by fast enough to make members of the group jump.

Laura Barlament, associate director of communications and marketing at Wagner College, co-founded the Grymes Hill Traffic Safety Working Group in the aftermath of Tillman's death.

In October and November, the group tracked traffic violations on Howard both before and after the new traffic signal went up and found that more drivers signaled before turning, and more stopped at the intersection, with the light in place.

Still, drivers still pass others who make turns, and 95 percent of drivers they recorded on Nov. 14 were speeding, with one out of every ten going more than 11 percent over the limit.

Ms. Barlament, also a bicyclist, said Tillman's death galvanized her. She wrote about her reaction in a blog post on the one-year anniversary of his death:

"I was chilled to the bone. Numb, outraged, stunned — and, strangely enough, a strand of guilt edged into this confusing swirl of feelings."

The guilt, she said, stemmed from an experience a year earlier — she was hit by a car as she biked on Howard Avenue, and though she wasn't badly hurt, and the driver stuck around, she began thinking about safety along that street. She had

started to think about an advocacy group back then, but, she recounted, "Sadly, it was R.J.'s death that really made it take off. Hence, the sense of guilt."

Speaking to the Advance, Ms. Barlament referred to the Tillman's death, bluntly, as a "murder."

"This murder happens, and no one has been made responsible. That's part of the outrage. That makes us want to take some sort of action," she said.

Investigators often consider hit-and-run accidents among the hardest cases to successfully solve and prosecute — the victim typically has no personal connection to the driver and damaged vehicles are often quickly scrapped, especially if the case is a high-profile one.

An analysis by the Advance of 15 fatal hit-and-runs on Staten Island from 2005 to 2011 shows that in all of the solved cases — 10 total — police either had the driver in custody or had a concrete idea of his identity within 48 hours of the wreck. As for the remaining five, police have yet to make any arrests.

In the case of Tillman, initial reports described the car as a dark-colored SUV, possibly a Dodge Durango, with a missing grille. (Police have the grille in evidence.)

Anyone with information about the hit-and-run driver may call Crime Stoppers at (800) 577-TIPS (8477); visit nypdcrimestoppers.com or send text tips to CRIMES (274637), then enter TIP577.

Meanwhile, Wagner's traffic group still pushes forward — the group has given out 200 yellow signs instructing Staten Island drivers to slow down, and the signs can be seen on front lawns, and in business storefront windows in communities such as Westerleigh, Great Kills, West Brighton, Sunnyside, Tompkinsville and Grymes Hill.

The college also teamed up with Transportation Alternatives — a non-profit advocacy group that focuses on bicycling, walking and public transit city-wide.

The "Ghost Bike" memorial placed in Tillman's honor remains in place — it weathered Hurricane Sandy — and is still being maintained.

The school recently put up a bicycle rack in Tillman's memory.

And Mrs. Tillman spoke at the December graduation of the school's nursing program.

"There was a pin made in his honor that was presented to his mom, who gave an amazingly poignant, kinda funny and touching speech to all of us," said classmate Liz Pesce, who was one of Tillman's close friends. "Each of us were asked who we would like to pin us — usually it would be our mom or boyfriend or favorite professor — and I actually had Nancy come up and pin me. It was really special to everyone."

Said Mrs. Tillman, "It amazes me, for such a young person, how much of an impact, he's had on people's lives."