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Wagner College mourns the loss of Staten Island hit-and-run victim Ronald Tillman

By JOHN M. ANNESE

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. — You're a coward, and you should turn yourself in.

That's the message Nancy Tillman has for the hit-and-run driver who killed her 29-year-old son, Ronald, as he bicycled along Howard Avenue last night — on his way home from Wagner College after studying for a major nursing exam.

"What a coward. What a coward," Mrs. Tillman, who lives in upstate Minoa, N.Y., near Syracuse, told the Advance today. She could see no way the driver, whose grill came off after the crash, wouldn't know he or she had hit someone.

"At least give him a little comfort instead of leaving him in pain and letting him die alone," she said. "I'm sure it's somebody who was doing something they weren't supposed to be doing... Still, fess up, and face the music. That's despicable."

The crash happened at about 9:13 last night, on a curved stretch of Howard Avenue between Highland and Grand avenues. Police are still looking for the vehicle — a dark-colored, newer-model SUV or pickup truck, possibly a Dodge Durango, with its front grille missing.

Ronald Tillman, who went by "RJ," was a nursing student at Wagner College, and was on his way home to Westerleigh after a night of studying at the library for an exam this morning.

"He told a friend, 'I need to get my eight hours of sleep,'" recounted fellow nursing student Liz Pesce, who was a close friend of Tillman.

He had graduated from Brooklyn College with a degree in film production, but when that career stalled, he shifted to nursing on the advice of a friend.

"Everything was just coming together. He was so happy. He finally found a career he was going to love," his mother said. Tillman had enrolled at Wagner this past September, in a 15-month fast-track nursing program.

He had taken a specific interest in geriatric nursing, Mrs. Tillman said, and volunteered at a local hospital, where he told his mother, he would sit and talk to seniors who might not have anyone else to speak with.

His car was stolen when he lived in Brooklyn, so he had taken to biking to get around. He loved to ride recreationally, she said, and participated in the Five Boro Bike Tour.

"He's a great kid. He has an amazing sense of humor," she said, recalling his flair for doing impressions.

Tillman's death hit the members of the tightly-knit second-degree nursing program particularly hard.

Miss Pesce, also of Westerleigh, said her class was greeted by three professors and two grief counselors at about 9 a.m. After classes were canceled, she said, the students in the program collected money to buy flowers at the Mignosi Supermarket down the hill for a roadside memorial.

“He had something infectious about him. He was so cool,” said Miss Pesce, who said she bonded with Tillman because the two were closer in age than the other, younger members of the program.

Tillman was quick to help anyone who needed it, she said — when she needed to re-work her schedule to accommodate a recent jaw surgery, he volunteered to rearrange his.

Miss Pesce said she helped Tillman find his apartment in Westerleigh — he had just moved in days ago, she said, because the commute from Brooklyn had become arduous.

“Today was actually going to be the first day when I was going to pick him up and take him to school,” she said.

As for his interest in geriatric nursing, that began after the class had been sent to work at Eger Healthcare and Rehabilitation Center in Egbertville last semester.

“There was this one guy in the nursing home. He had just really bonded with him,” Miss Pesce said. The two would talk about the New York Yankees, and Frank Sinatra, she recalled.

Tillman is survived by an older sister, who lives in Australia, and three half-siblings. His father died when he was 5, Mrs. Tillman said, “So he and I had been really close.”

Wagner College will hold a memorial service tomorrow at 4:30 p.m. in Spiro Hall 2 for Tillman. The service will be followed by a reception in the Union Atrium.

“Ronald was a wonderful young man who had finally found his passion, nursing,” Wagner College President Richard Guarasci said today. “He loved being at Wagner, and he was studying hard last evening preparing for an exam. Our hearts have been broken by his loss, and our thoughts and prayers are with his family.”

Wagner students and faculty members were offered grief counseling services from The Center for Health and Wellness. Students can call 718-390-3158 to make appointments.

The e-mail also noted that the NYPD is looking to speak to anyone with information about the accident.

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.

— Advance staff writer Stephanie Slepian contributed to this report.