



Staten Island Advance

Thursday, February 23, 2012

11 days later, driver remains at large in Staten Island hit-run tragedy

by DEAN BALSAMINI

If the past is any indication, time is not on the side of investigators when it comes to solving a fatal hit-and-run case.

An Advance analysis 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 say they have yet to make any arrests.

Investigators are hoping that trend won't hold true for the case of Ronald (RJ) Tillman, a 29-year-old Wagner College nursing student who was struck and killed while bicycling home on Howard Avenue Feb. 12.

Police are still looking for witnesses or surveillance footage that will help them identify the vehicle — a dark-colored SUV, possibly a Dodge Durango — and its driver.

Too often, if hit-and-run cases don't get solved in the first few days, trails grow cold, witnesses grow hard to find, and evidence becomes scarcer, said Robert Castelli, a former New York State Police investigator and John Jay College professor, who now serves as a state assemblyman in Westchester County.

He wouldn't speak to whether a driver's sense of guilt may fade away or linger over time, but, he said, "It certainly increases their confidence in being able to get away with the crime."

That's true of any type of criminal investigation, he said. "That's unfortunately the nature of the beast. It's better to be very lucky than very skillful in that kind of case," Castelli added.

Typically, police on Staten Island make an arrest within hours, thanks to witnesses or the driver leaving the totaled vehicle at the scene.

In three of the nine solved cases, the suspect surrendered to authorities.

In one 2008 case, the driver fled from his mother's car after crashing it in Dongan Hills, then went on the run, according to police. His passenger died three months later. Police knew the driver's identity, according to authorities, but didn't locate him until he surrendered — about a month before his passenger's death.

In another case, an August 2010 crash that saw two dead and four wounded in a one-car crash, the driver remained on the scene but wouldn't admit to being behind the wheel. That led police to use DNA evidence and witness accounts to sort out the survivors and determine who was driving.

The Tillman case may yet break the trend, Castelli said, because police have a piece of evidence — the SUV's front grille — that could ultimately lead to the car, even if searching through Department of Motor Vehicle databases takes time.

In the unsolved cases, the lack of closure can be heartrending, says District Attorney Daniel Donovan.

"For those unsolved ones, those people just want some solace, some peace," he says.

That's certainly the case with Josephine Romano, who still goes out to the spot where her husband was run down by a hit-and-run driver more than three years ago. Her last trip was Feb. 11, so she could put up Valentine's Day messages and photos on a tree at the side of the road.

Mrs. Romano's husband, Antonio — a 55-year-old school bus driver who emigrated from Italy to Staten Island when he was a teen — was struck down on the side of North Railroad Avenue, as he stood outside his parked car near Atlantic Avenue on Nov. 3, 2008. He died six days later, and to this day, police haven't found the driver of the black Jeep Cherokee that hit him.

"Every day I cry ... every day," she says. To the driver, she says, "Why do you sleep at night? Why? Why didn't you stop to help my husband?"

John Signorelli, a retired NYPD detective who investigated fatal car crashes as part of the department's Accident Investigation Squad, says the Romano case still sticks with him, as one of only two of his hit-and-run fatality cases that didn't end in arrest.

"If there's any type of evidence at all, it makes it easier," he says. "With Romano, it was raining out, there really weren't any witnesses, it's a desolate area."

Signorelli recalls one case — a hit-and-run on Hylan Boulevard in 2007, where the driver struck and killed a pedestrian, parked his car at his brother's house, then took a bus to Brooklyn. The suspect went to a Dunkin' Donuts in Brooklyn and watched the news, and when he saw the details of the crash on the air, he turned himself in.

Too often, Signorelli says, a hit-and-run driver will get out of his or her vehicle, then, after realizing the victim is dead, get back in and drive off. And "nine out of 10 times," he says, hit-and-run drivers flee because they're drunk, or they have a warrant out for their arrest, or a suspended license, or they're in the car with someone they shouldn't be.

If that's the case, the hit-and-run driver might be thinking of defense strategy — leaving the scene of a fatal accident is a class D felony, but if a driver is high or drunk, there's a chance of much more serious charges.

"It's certainly not as bad as being charged with manslaughter or murder," says defense attorney Mario Gallucci.

"I would never advise anybody to leave the scene of a fatal crash ... For a lawyer to do that, you're actually an accessory of the crime," Gallucci says.

Still, he says, "As a defense attorney, you love it when they leave the scene, because it helps your case." Alcohol passes through the bloodstream within hours, and many drugs pass within a few days.

District Attorney Donovan acknowledges that the law could stand to be tougher in certain leaving-the-scene crashes.

But even if hit-and-run laws included language presuming that a driver is intoxicated or otherwise impaired, he doubts that a panicked motorist who makes a split-second decision to leave or stay is weighing what class of felony he or she will face.

Says Donovan: "There's nobody that's thinking that clearly at the moment."