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GRYMES HILL

‘There is a hole in my heart’



A ghost bike is placed on the site where Ronald Tillman lost his life on Feb. 12, 2012. He was fatally struck by a driver along Howard Avenue. The motorist has never been caught. Irene Spezzamonte, Staten Island Advance

Unsolved hit-run death of Wagner College nursing student in 2012 still haunts his mom

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“Don’t forget to get some rest.”

That is the last text message Nancy Tillman sent to her son Ronald at 6:30 p.m. on Feb. 12, 2012, after his long day of studying at the library at Wagner College on Grymes Hill.

Ronald, who went by the nickname “R.J.,” would die three hours later after a driver hit him on a curved stretch of Howard Avenue between Highland and Grand avenues while he was biking back to his apartment in Westerleigh.

The motorist has never been caught.

“My son was left on the road to die,” said Tillman, who lives in upstate Minoa, New York. “There is a hole in my heart. I think about him every day.”

R.J., 29, was a nursing student at Wagner College.

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.

He was in a 15-month, fast-track nursing program and was particularly interested in geriatric nursing, his mom said.

“Everything was just coming together. He was so happy. He finally found a career he was going to love,” Tillman told the Advance in 2012, just a day after the crash.

Since that day, Tillman said she hasn’t openly talked about what happened to R.J.

Seven years later and after a long healing process, she spoke again to the Advance hoping that “his death doesn’t go for nothing.”

“I can’t hold on to the anger,” she said. “It was only hurting

SEE TILLMAN, A6

Tillman

FROM A1

me. Now I focus on the good times and good memories.”

At the location of the crash there is now ghost bike — a white bicycle placed at the site by transportation activists where a rider was killed in a crash.

There are currently five ghost bikes in the borough, according to ghostbikes.org, the organization that is in charge of the initiative.

HIT-RUNS ON RISE

Crashes where drivers leave the scene are on the rise in our borough.

In 2018, Staten Island saw a 5% increase in hit-and-run crashes that caused personal injury from the previous year, while the city overall had a 3% increase, the Advance previously reported.

The 120th Precinct recorded a 23% increase, the highest spike in the borough, with a total number of 48 hit-and-runs with injury in 2018, up from 39 in 2017, the data shows.

Its neighboring precinct, the 121st, recorded an 11% increase, with 53 crashes recorded in 2017, compared to 59 in 2018. Both the 122nd and the 123rd precincts had a 10% decrease. Many of the crashes, however, remain unsolved, leaving grieving family members and survivors without justice.

For the 168 crashes with injury that occurred in 2018 on Staten Island, the NYPD was able to make only 16 arrests. That is just 10%. R.J.’s case is not any different. The investigation remains ongoing, a police spokesperson told the Advance last week.

For the Tillmans, R.J.’s death shook the family to its core.

R.J.’s older sister lived in Australia at the time of the crash and flew back to the United States as soon as she knew what happened, the mother said.

“It was very hard on her,” said Tillman.

R.J.’s sister eventually moved back to the United States to stay closer to her family, especially her mother.

“In the beginning it was just every day of pain,” R.J.’s mom said. “I was always crying.”

A couple of years after the tragic crash,

“I can’t hold on to the anger. It was only hurting me. Now I focus on the good times and good memories.”

Nancy Tillman

Tillman decided to join Families for Safe Streets, an organization comprised of survivors and families of those killed in car crashes, as she is “trying to make things better.”

R.J.’s mom, however, knows that, in her heart, peace will probably never come.

“Nothing is going to give my son back,” she said in tears.

The Advance is analyzing recent hit-and-runs on Staten Island and how and if they were resolved. If you would like to share your story, please email ispezzamonte@siadvance.com



Ronald Tillman, also known as R.J., was in an accelerated program at Wagner College to become a nurse. Irene Spezzamonte, Staten Island Advance