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Patricia Strickler’s Toyota Corolla. She went through a stop sign on May 18 and her car collided with a dump truck. That dump truck then collided with a van driven by Randy Bennett. PHOTOS PROVIDED/OHIO HIGHWAY PATROL

In the blink of an eye

A fatal traffic crash can occur without warning

Tim Botos Canton Repository | USA TODAY NETWORK

Editor’s note: This story was reported and written from interviews with cited sources, as well as Ohio Highway Patrol records, interviews, reports and photos; an autopsy report; court records; Repository research; and firsthand observation of driver routes and the area of the crash. Two drivers, Patricia Strickler and Justin Bradford, did not want to be interviewed for the story. Some details of the crash, injuries and photos may be graphic.

The first call to 911 came in at 10:24 a.m. • “There’s a fire, get out, get out!” the female caller shouted on the open line. • “What’s the location of your emergency?” the dispatcher asked. • “Umm, Ohio 60 ... the address I’m at is 1597! There was two trucks and a car that just had an accident! The, the dump truck’s on fire! There’s another truck and it looks like it’s turned upside down ... it’s in the ditch ...”

Fatal traffic crashes can occur with no warning. Drivers have little time to react. No time to avoid or evade. Most crashes take less than one second, from beginning to end. Within that first second, the vehicle begins to crumple before physics transfers the force of impact to people inside.

Patricia Strickler was on her way to pick up flowers. Justin Bradford was headed to Sarver Paving. Jackson Township’s Randy Bennett was going to drop off pharmaceutical supplies to Pomerene Hospital in Millersburg.

The lives of all three — strangers to one another — collided near the intersection of state Route 60 and County Road 1600 in Ashland County’s Montgomery Township on that Tuesday morning, May 18.

It all happened so fast.

Count off three seconds. *One, two, three.* One second before fatal impact, all was fine. It was a beautiful spring day, already 74 degrees. In the next second came a high-speed collision. By the third second, all three vehicles had



Randy Bennett, of Jackson Township, was thrust into a three-vehicle fatal crash on May 18. His van collided with a dump truck in Ashland County.

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Contract negotiations with police, fire unions at impasse

Lori Steineck Canton Repository  
USA TODAY NETWORK

CANTON – The clock is ticking as the collective bargaining agreements between the city and its safety forces expire in two weeks.

Negotiations with the police and fire unions, which represent 287 men and women, have stalled.

“We have reached an impasse with the (Canton Police Patrolmen’s Association) union and therefore we’re going forward with the next step, which would be fact-finding,” said Vivianne Duffrin, Canton’s assistant law director, who is negotiating on behalf of the city.

The unresolved issues between the city and the unions are submitted to a “third-party, neutral person,” who will examine the contracts and make recommendations, she said.

“Essentially, he will craft a proposed contract for us, which can be accepted or rejected by either the city or the union,” Duffrin said.

If those are rejected, “Then there’s another process called conciliation, which is in front of another neutral person. That person makes a final decision and creates a binding collective bargaining agreement for the parties,”

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California governor ups efforts to combat smash-and-grabs

Don Thompson  
ASSOCIATED PRESS

SACRAMENTO, Calif. – Stung by recent headline-grabbing smash-and-grab robberies, California Gov. Gavin Newsom on Friday said he will seek more than \$300 million in state funding over three years to boost law enforcement efforts to combat retail theft.

“The issue of crime and violence is top of mind all throughout not only the state of California but across the United States, highlighted recently by some high-profile retail theft operations,” Newsom said.

He added that “these organized retail mobs ... (have) a profound impact on our feelings of safety here in this state, this region and as I note, this country.”

Newsom proposed giving \$255 million in grants to local law enforcement agencies to put more police at stores to deter organized retail crime over the next three years.

An additional \$30 million over three years in the proposed budget he sends to lawmakers next month would go to county district attorneys to support prosecutions of retail and auto theft-related crimes.

Another \$18 million over three years would go to create a new “organized theft special unit” under the state attorney general, with investigators and

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# Crash

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“I heard (a) crunch,” Bradford said. Fuller’s phone call with Bennett went silent.

## One second after impact

Bennett’s van landed on its top, in a ditch next to the southbound lane. Bradford’s dump truck, its engine on fire, tumbled on top of the van. Strickler’s car sat in the middle of the intersection. The Toyota’s side and driver’s air bags were inflated. The right front tire had been ripped off the axle. Dump truck tire marks were visible on the hood and right quarter panel. The hood was crumpled downward. Flames burned inside the dump truck engine.

Beneath the dump truck, the engine of Bennett’s van had been smashed into the cab. The bumper and grill were pulled away. The hood had crumpled. The windshield was broken and twisted. Air bags were inflated.

Campbell, the Stark County investigator, did not handle this crash because it was in Ashland County. However, he’s seen how much damage can be done to an unrestrained human body in a high-speed crash.

“You have to understand that when your’e driving 55 mph, everything inside the car, and everything inside your body, is traveling 55 mph, too,” Campbell explained.

In sanitary terms, Bennett died of blunt force trauma. His injuries were catastrophic. His head was scraped and cut; his skull and jaw were fractured; his brain was torn, cut and bleeding. His sternum, pelvis and ribs were broken; his internal organs had shifted due to a lacerated diaphragm. His body was battered; his left leg and arm broken in multiple places; his left kneecap dislocated; his right ankle dislocated.

Strickler and Bradford, both wearing belts and shoulder harnesses, had suffered injuries, too. But they were far less severe, described mostly as cuts, bruises and pain in some of their limbs and chest. Both are being sued in Richland County for wrongful death by the estate of Bennett.

Whenever the Ohio Highway Patrol



Ohio Highway Patrol at scene of the crash. The Patrol crash reconstruction team was able to re-create the three-vehicle crash, with help from the “black box” from one of the vehicles. PHOTO PROVIDED/OHIO HIGHWAY PATROL

handles a fatal crash, its crash reconstruction team is summoned. Working backward from the final resting place of vehicles, investigators re-create the crash.

Like putting together a puzzle.

With an initial 320 hours of training and regular additional specialty classes, its team members use science, math, physics and modern technology to detail exactly how and why a crash occurred. While witness statements can often be unreliable, formulas that include such things as sin, cosin and square roots can spit out exact calculations based on the vehicles involved and road conditions.

“87 feet per second,” Ryan Fox, crash reconstruction supervisor for Northeast Ohio, said as he rattled off numbers he can see in his sleep — the distance a vehicle covers at 60 mph.

They can often download data directly from a vehicle’s computer, a black box of sorts. It reveals what occurred in the five seconds prior to air bag deployment. Were its brakes applied? How fast was the vehicle going? Which direction was the steering wheel turned? In some cases, the information can even be broken down into tenths of a second.

“Five seconds is a long time ... that’s often 50 validation points,” Fox said, explaining black boxes on some vehicles

enables reconstruction experts to “see” such information as braking, steering and throttle data at 50 measurable points within the five seconds prior to air bag deployment.

Trooper Elliot Rawson, a reconstruction team member, would later examine fluid trails and tire marks on the road; scrapes and gouges to vehicles and pavement; and hundreds of photos from the scene. He’d use such tools as high-tech surveying equipment and CAD software to compare his findings to statements from witnesses and drivers.

And perhaps most important, he retrieved black box data from Strickler’s car.

It showed she did not apply her brakes five seconds prior to striking the dump truck. Not at four seconds, or three seconds prior either. She did press the brake at two seconds before impact, but then let off it again. Her car was traveling 32 mph when it struck the dump truck.

Three months after the crash, Strickler was found guilty of vehicular manslaughter in Ashland Municipal Court. It’s a misdemeanor charge. She was fined \$150; her license suspended for a year, but with limited driving privileges.

Fuller said it wasn’t nearly enough.

She wrote a letter to the court, prior to sentencing, concluding with this:

*“That Tuesday, I lost my purpose in live, my best friend, my lover, my support, my person, and my soul mate. He was everything to me and me to him. I still can’t get through a day without crying and it is still really hard for me to talk about it. I am so lost without him. ... Now I have nothing and no one again. It is so lonely.”*

The force of impact on Bennett’s van when it struck the dump truck may have been as if he’d rammed into an oak tree. A calculation is derived from measuring the mass of the objects involved, their speed and distance traveled after collision, as well as factoring in the crumpling of the vehicles.

Reconstruction experts often talk about the Delta-V of a traffic crash. It’s basically the change in a vehicle’s velocity from the moment of impact, until the moment it stops moving.

“Can you die, even in a seat belt? ... Yes,” Fox said.

But he added it’s far more rare. A crash at 50 mph may have a Delta-V of only 20. Modern cars are built to absorb and dissipate the energy, before it reaches people inside. Safety belts help hold people in place, preventing them from striking windshields, for example.

Without a seat belt, though?

“A Delta-V of 20 would be like running into a brick wall at 20 mph. Would you do that?” Fox said, adding that three crashes occur within a single crash — vehicle to object; occupants to seat belt and/or interior of the vehicle; and finally the body’s internal organs to bone.

All of those details would be examined later. After Fuller sped to the scene of the crash, while listening to arriving rescue crew sirens on Bennett’s still open cell phone line. After a crane was needed to lift the dump truck off of Bennett’s van so his body could be removed. After Bradford had managed to kick the windshield out of his dump truck to climb out.

Four more 911 calls followed the first one.

The last came in at 10:29 a.m.

“911, what’s the location of the emergency,” asked the dispatcher.

“Same emergency ... we can’t get to the (van) below it,” the male caller said. “So, we don’t know what’s going on there.”

Reach Tim at 330-580-8333 or tim.botos@cantonrep.com. On Twitter: @tbotosREP





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