



A Fateful Decision

Fifteen-year-old Carlos Manzo sat in the front seat of his father's pick-up truck, revving the engine. A buddy sat beside him in the passenger seat. "You could just see it on their faces; they were going to do something dumb," said Antonio Lechuda, a neighbor who was watching the scene unfold. Then, they did.

It had been an ordinary day for Jasmine and Ibeth. The two young girls were enjoying a stroll through the neighborhood on their bikes, taking in the beautiful day. The two girls, cousins and best friends, lived in the same house down the street with their mothers. Jasmine was on her bike and Ibeth her scooter as they rode along the sidewalk. Neither of them had any idea what was about to happen to them as they rode by the next house.

Suddenly, and apparently without paying attention to what was behind him, Carlos threw the truck in reverse. The Red Dodge Pickup truck careened out of its driveway, plowing over the two little girls in the process. Eight-year-old Ibeth Rodriguez and 9-year-old Jasmine Hernandez were rushed to the North Colorado Medical Center in critical condition. Jasmine died from her injuries less than an hour later, at around 4:30 P.M. The other girl suffered serious injuries. In an instant, two families were devastated by one reckless act, all because of a teenage boy showing off for his friend in a truck.

"I saw the kids out there. I thought, 'there's no way he's going to back up.' And he threw it in reverse, and he just plowed over those girls," said another neighbor, Laurie. "I think they were just messing around, trying to show off. But still it's senseless." Laurie then described how she dialed 911 and sat with the mothers of the girls as they waited for paramedics to arrive.

The boys fled the scene after the accident. Police tracked down the truck later that day, at around 5:30 P.M., just an hour and a half after the accident. They arrested 15-year-old Carloz, who was later charged with vehicular homicide, vehicular assault, reckless driving, leaving the scene of an accident after causing death, leaving the scene after serious bodily injury, and two counts of second degree assault with a deadly weapon. Those charges could keep him in prison for up to 41 years.

The accident occurred in Greeley, Colorado, just before 4 P.M. on Monday, August 27, 2007. It's a day that is now imprinted into the minds of many, many people. One little girl is now dead. Another is critically injured. Two mothers are grieving, one of whom has lost the most important thing in her life. She'll never forget that afternoon. The neighbors who witnessed the accident and stood by the scene as a child died in front of them will never forget that day. The passenger in the car that struck the girl will live with the guilt of that fateful afternoon, replaying it in his head for the rest of his life.

And finally, the day will ring ominous for Carloz, who for all intensive purposes lost his life as he knew it on that day as well. He's now facing a hefty prison sentence. He'll have to live with the guilt of having killed a child. Every day for the rest of his life, he must live with knowledge that a little girl is dead because of him. Close your eyes and put yourself in that situation for a moment. One minute, you're horsing around with your friends and thinking about where to get a bite to eat or what you're going to do tomorrow. The next, you're sitting in a cold cell, with the realization that you may not leave prison until you're approaching eligibility for retirement.



We've all done stupid things at times. So will you. Unfortunately, it only takes a few seconds of recklessness for a scene to turn disastrous. This story is just another all too common example of how one stupid decision can forever ruin your life and that of others. When I think of all the stupid things me and my brother did when we were teenagers, we could just as easily ended up like Carloz, and so can you.

We know teens will be teens, and back when dinosaurs roamed the Earth, we were teens once too. But motor vehicles and the reckless abandon of youth are two things that just don't mix. When I was young and reckless, I was coming back from the flea market in my truck after unloading some junk. A woman pulled out into the intersection and blocked my way. She intentionally turned on a yellow knowing the other road was backed up and knowing she would be sitting in the middle of the road once the lights changed. I was so irritated as I watched the other lane beside me take off on the green light, while I was stuck there with this inconsiderate woman in my way. It wasn't until my light turned yellow that she was able to move out of the intersection.

Anxious to show my disgust, I peeled out. Despite having tied everything down before leaving, the rope tore and I lost my load in the middle of the intersection. I spent the next 10 minutes picking up debris from the road along with a couple of good Samaritans who stopped to help, as cars swerved around. I didn't care about the stuff, but that was one of the most embarrassing moments of my life. After that, I always thought twice about peeling out. No matter how hot/tired/irritated/disgusted I am, I always take a moment to remember that incident, and it's since kept me from repeating such stupid mistakes.

That's what we hope this story is. That second thought; a reminder in the back of your head about how quickly things can go wrong. Had either Carloz or his friend had such a second thought, a little girl would still be alive and well today and so much misery – both his own and others – could have been avoided. There are many more tragedies out there waiting for teens like you and many more second thoughts to be had. Make sure you have yours every time you get behind the wheel.

