

Ortega Highway, linking Orange and Riverside counties, is picturesque — and deadly

By Josh Cain

November 22, 2022

[Story link](#)

Ortega Highway offers motorists picturesque views of the Cleveland National Forest's canyons and scrub-covered peaks — and a winding route that poses constant challenges and is home, too often, to death.

Surrounded by sheer walls and steep drop-offs, Ortega, also called Highway 74, features one blind curve after another that obscures what's just beyond the next bend.

With help from UC Berkeley traffic safety researchers, state officials map deaths on California's highways and freeways going back to 2011. Through August of last year, when the statistics were last updated, at least 57 people died in crashes along Highway 74's heart, the 28 miles from the 5 Freeway in San Juan Capistrano to Grand Avenue in the City of Lake Elsinore.

Of those, 35 were motorcyclists — 61% percent.

For the entire route of Highway 74, which loses its name of Ortega east of Grand and ultimately courses for more than 110 miles, all the way from San Juan Capistrano to Palm Desert, the roadway is among the deadliest stretches in Southern California.

In all, 214 people have died along the entire 74 in those 10-plus years. The next-closest highway in terms of deadliness, excluding freeways, is Highway 138 that runs across the Antelope Valley, through San Bernardino and northern Los Angeles counties, with 158 deaths.

Highway 74 even outpaces both the 5 Freeway inside Orange County, which saw 134 deaths, and the 91 Freeway across Orange and Riverside counties, with 148. The 74 nearly meets the death toll of the 5 over that period in dense Los Angeles County, which had 239 deaths.

Those two freeways ferry hundreds of thousands of vehicles per day. Ortega, according to Caltrans, carries just 10,700 vehicles at its halfway point between San Juan Capistrano and the City of Lake Elsinore.

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In motorcycle lingo they are called “squids.”

There are different theories on how the term was born, but to John Covington, a longtime biker from Fullerton who runs a pool-cleaning business, a squid is an experienced rider who drives

dangerously, or a very inexperienced one. They are the ones who court danger most, the 62-year-old says.

“The squids are the guys who are leaning off their motorcycles,” Covington said, describing the maneuver when a motorcyclist at high speed hugs the ground to make a tight turn. “They’re trying to drag their knees on the ground as they go around corners.”

“Motorcyclists use those winding areas to test their skills,” said Officer Rafael Reynoso, a California Highway Patrol spokesman who works out of the agency’s nearby San Juan Capistrano station. “They drive a little too fast. Unfortunately, many of them crash.”

Highway 74 is the only direct route linking central Riverside County in the east to south Orange County in the west. On the highway, there are two distinct groups of drivers: Commuters Monday through Friday, and bikers and tourists on the weekends.

No matter the vehicle, speed and distracted driving claim the most lives on Ortega, said both Reynoso and Officer Mike Lassig, a CHP officer and spokesman based in Temecula. With no divider, it’s extremely easy to drift into oncoming traffic. Drivers, just like motorcyclists, must pay attention or risk running off of the side of a mountain.

From San Juan Capistrano to the City of Lake Elsinore alone, there were 57 fatal crashes, the data shows. Of those, 17 were head-on when a vehicle drifted over the centerline.

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The heart of the route where the Ortega Highway now lies was once an old passage for Native Americans living in the area, then later stagecoaches trying to reach the coast.

Serious work on the highway began in 1913 with the blessing of the Orange County Board of Supervisors, who signed off on an improvement project stretching 13 miles east, past what is now Ronald W. Caspers Wilderness Park. But they needed to persuade Riverside County officials so the road could cut through their turf as well and link the cities at each end.

In 1929, according to an Orange County Historical Society’s February 2015 write-up, politicians from east and west chose the exact routes they’d further carve up into the mountains to begin what was then known as the Elsinore-San Juan Capistrano Highway-to-the-Sea. By 1933, after starting at their respective ends, the work crews met in the middle at the county line.

The road was eventually renamed in honor of Don Jose Francisco Ortega, a member of the Portola expedition of 1769-70, the first exploration of the interior of California by Europeans.

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Just past 9 a.m. on Sunday, Feb. 6, 2022, a 45-year-old motorcyclist from Huntington Beach was cruising at roughly the 55-mph speed limit, according to the CHP, winding along the highway through Ortega Oaks, a tiny village between San Juan and Lake Elsinore with a lush campground offering spaces for RVs and humble modular homes in neat rows.

In front of him loomed one of Ortega's more difficult spots: a nearly three-quarter-mile-long S-shaped loop.

From his eastbound side of Ortega, the second curve requires bikers to lean into a right turn for more than 1,500 feet before the highway finally spits them out. But then, immediately — they're faced with a quick curve back to the left.

The motorcyclist failed to negotiate that second curve, barreling over the dirt shoulder until he clipped a metal barrier. While flying off of Ortega, he lost his grip and was thrown over heavy brush and rocks. When paramedics arrived, he was dead.

Locals have seen similar crashes play out.

After taking over the lease from its previous owners earlier this year, Victoria Singleton and her husband now run Ortega Highway's iconic Candy Store in Ortega Oaks, a historic stop for visitors along the route seeking candy, of course, but also baked goods and coffee. Singleton said she's seen bikers challenge each other to death-defying races.

Some groups start from the driveway just outside the store. She's seen bikers weave in and out of oncoming traffic to get even a tiny advantage.

"They use it as a raceway," Singleton said.

Singleton, 48, has lived in Ortega Oaks for six years. She grew up in Big Bear and loves the mountain scenery that greets her each day. But not every driver is aware of how remote the highway can be. Motorists get overwhelmed and stop to get their bearings.

"This highway will swallow you up," she said. "Google (Maps) takes them up here, but once they get here, they're like, 'Where am I?'"

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Going east, after miles and miles of twists through the rugged, forested valleys of the Cleveland National Forest, the route emerges from the mountains thousands of feet up and drivers are treated to an expansive view of the City of Lake Elsinore and beyond, before descending in a wide loop to Grand Avenue below.

Highway 74 then runs northeast past Lake Elsinore's namesake lake, later merging with the 215 Freeway before shooting off due east to the Coachella Valley.

This looping descent from the Orange County border into the Lake Elsinore area is the deadliest stretch of the the 74 — easily — with 24 fatalities during the 10-plus years.

This is where the latest Caltrans project on Highway 74 is underway, from that county border for six miles east to Monte Vista Street: New retaining walls are going up and hillsides are getting cut into for widened lanes, a two-foot median and extended or added shoulders.

Carolina Rojas, a Caltrans spokeswoman for the \$49 million project, said work, which began a year ago, is projected to be finished by 2025.

“There are just a lot of curves on this highway, and the terrain was kind of rough,” Rojas said. “It definitely needed improvement. This was overdue.”

To those who live along Ortega or take the highway to work, it is a lifeline, one that sometimes prompts frustration among locals, with closures for Caltrans construction or other reasons.

“If you have a shutdown for a fatality or a fire, you have to play this game,” said Jill McFarlane-Jaynes, who lives along Ortega and operates one of at least two Facebook groups, hers with 2,500 members, to answer a simple question: Is Ortega open today?

“I could turn around and go down the other way, or I could just wait it out,” she explained. “And, actually, with the price of gas lately, I just wait it out.”

A more coarse Facebook group, “DEATH FOLLOWS YOU ON HIGHWAY 74,” has a few hundred members and takes aim at tailgaters, a frequent pest on the highway with one lane in each direction most of the way. An illustration of the Grim Reaper with blood splattered across a road stripe gets the point across with a message: “SLOWDOWN. DON’T TAILGATE. STOP BEING AN A**HOLE.”

Gina Haden, 49, lives in Rancho Mission Viejo, a planned community under construction in phases that straddles Ortega. While it’s not a daily trip for her, Haden said she occasionally takes her 2-year-old grandson with her along Ortega on their way to Lake Elsinore. The constant construction makes a 30-minute trip one that oftentimes takes 45 minutes to an hour. Driving Ortega, she said, does mean putting up with frequent tailgating.

“I drive slow with my grandson in the back seat — you hope he doesn’t get carsick,” she said. “I pull over continuously to let people pass, but in some parts there’s no shoulder, so you don’t have many options.”

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Lassig, the Temecula-based CHP officer, certainly knows Ortega’s deadly reputation.

“The thing is, I’ve driven (Ortega) thousands of times,” the officer said. “Really, maybe tens of thousands of times. And I’ve never had a situation where I was involved in a traffic collision. I follow the rules of the road: I’m watching my speed; I’m not crossing over; I’m not on my cell phone. I’m staying focused.”

McFarlane-Jaynes, who runs one of the Facebook pages, knows the reputation, too.

“You have to be 100% focused on the road,” she said. “My family, for one, will not visit me. They’re scared to death. (Ortega’s) reputation proceeds itself. It can be very deadly if people aren’t paying attention.”

Covington, the Fullerton biker, helps manage the Airheads Beemer Club, a 4,000-member international group of BMW motorcycle enthusiasts.

“For Orange County, that’s the longest road that doesn’t have a stop on it that’s not a freeway,” he said. “You can start in San Juan Capistrano, go have breakfast at the beach, then meet up for coffee on Ortega. There’s a couple of places along the road that you can stop and get something to eat.

“You just have a beautiful view, it’s quite spectacular,” Covington said. “It’s just fun. It’s rural — you get a chance to escape from the city.”

These days, Covington said, as the communities nearby have gotten more crowded, putting more vehicles on the highway, he mostly stays away from Ortega.

Still, at times Covington will carefully carve up the old route.

“If I get the chance, I’ll take it,” he said. “I’ll be coming up from San Diego on the 15 (Freeway), and I’ll say, ‘You know what, let’s take Ortega.’”

After Bond fire menaced their homes, some canyon residents return

By Josh Cain

December 8, 2020

[Story link](#)

When David and Dar Sherwin returned to their sprawling ranch property in Williams Canyon in the Santa Ana Mountains, they found a little note from the firefighters who saved their home.

The couple paused. Both teared up.

“It said, ‘We have your back,’” Dar Sherwin said.

The couple said they felt lucky. They were not among those that lost their homes.

Related: Firefighters get 90% containment on Bond fire in Orange County canyons

By around 11:30 p.m. on Wednesday, David Sherwin said they could see the fire peeking from behind a ridge.

“We could just see the glow and the plumes of smoke coming over the ridge,” he said. “It was pretty intense ... that’s when we knew to get our stuff and get going.”

About an hour later, the family was packed up and heading out of the canyon. Fire was all over the place by then, and Williams Canyon Road was lined with fire vehicles.

“Just trying to get our butts out of here,” he said. “The rest was up to God.”

Many residents in the area praised the work of firefighters, who with their backs to homes stood their ground against a raging fire. The flames scorched canyon walls all over the area, but few homes appeared to be lost in these communities. Burn scars showed where the firefighters held the line.

Besides the rumbling utility and fire trucks that were still crowding the roads here, things appeared to be returning back to normal.

The fire still managed to pick off a few homes. Down the hill from the Sherwins’ property, a neighboring residence was almost completely destroyed.

The main house was reduced to ash and rubble. Also destroyed was a trailer containing mementos and collectibles — a stack of hockey cards that curled up from the heat were scattered amid photo negatives. A rooster crowed nearby from behind a wire fence. Six or so chickens clucked in the enclosure, too.

Many who live out here take advantage of the space to keep a few animals around. The Sherwins have a pack of dogs, six ducks, a bunch of chickens and three goats. They also have Mufasa, a chubby tabby cat.

The dogs and goats came with the Sherwins when they were forced to flee on Thursday. Mufasa and the ducks and chickens stayed behind. All were doing fine when the family came back. Firefighters had taken good care of them, too.

The goats probably helped keep the Bond fire at bay, chewing up some of the brush surrounding the Sherwins' property. The couple also fastidiously maintained a buffer of bare land around their home.

As a result, very little of their home was damaged. A large air compressor was toasted in the flames, and a trailer near another house on their land that they rent out also was destroyed. A 3,000 gallon water tank that used to be on top of a hill behind the property somehow broke loose and rolled down slope, coming to rest on its side.

David Sherwin pointed to an area behind his house where he had just cleared a bunch of brush a few months ago. That's where a line of charred earth was stopped in its tracks. Clearing all that land helped the firefighters who surrounded his property with hose lines.

"They basically set up an area and they held it," he said.

On Tuesday, there were signs the fire isn't totally gone. It's just slumbering.

In every wildfire, crews of firefighters spend days, sometimes weeks, trudging through brush and woods to find spots of burnt ground where there might still be hot spots — literally patches of dirt that are so hot, they're smoldering as many as a few feet under the surface. If the wind kicks up that dirt, embers could fly and spark another fire in the same area.

In Modjeska Canyon, one team of inmate firefighters — California prisoners who are trained up and hired to fight fires for pennies a day — marched up the side of a charred canyon slope on a mission to find hot spots like this.

Cal Fire Capt. Joe Hatch was watching them do their work from the driver's seat of his SUV, his head resting on his shoulder and his eyes sleepy.

The danger of this fire really hasn't passed, either.

"All last night," he said, "we were hearing reports of smoke, embers and fires from neighbors."

Without any active flames, fire crews can at least respond to most of those reports at this point. But it's still back breaking work.

He said fire crews could be out there for a few more days, but they'll start to wind down their operations soon. In the meantime, helicopters still flew overhead searching for warm patches of earth and directing firefighters on the ground to them.

From his second floor deck, Rob Prather watched the line of inmate firefighters in their orange jumpsuits and helmets, hauling chainsaws and shovels, hike up the slope behind his home. They've been working at a steady pace since he returned a few days ago.

"They're amazingly diligent," the 52-year-old contractor said. "We've had yellow, green and now orange."

Prather and his wife and their six dogs hightailed it out of Modjeska Canyon at around 4:30 a.m. on Thursday. They've only lived here for around two years.

They've seen three fires this year. The Bond fire came the closest, with the most ferocity.

"I watch for if the fire is gonna cross Santiago Canyon Road at the entrance to the canyon," he said. "There's only two ways out of here — there and the other way."

Prather's wife operates a bar nearby, where they rode out the fire for a few days. They returned to their house untouched by flames. But the wait was harrowing; they watched some video footage shot with a drone that captured what was happening on their property.

Their home was built in the 1940s and has survived multiple fires in that time. Through the drone camera, they watched the flames reach the edge of their land. This time they weren't so sure the house would survive.

"When it gets in your back yard — there's always that potentiality," Prather said. "That's a gut-wrenching sight."

Of the San Fernando Valley's 52 homicides in 2019, only Michael Kelly's remains unsolved

By Josh Cain
Nov. 13, 2020

[Story link](#)

On Feb. 15, 2019, a dark-colored sedan cruises north on Van Nuys Boulevard, where it cuts through row after row of squat, suburban homes in the San Fernando Valley's northeastern corner.

This is dense and historic Pacoima, one of the oldest neighborhoods in Los Angeles, with a deeply rooted Hispanic culture.

The driver of the sedan, shrouded inside, drifts toward Glenoaks Boulevard. Up ahead, two young men walk across Van Nuys.

It's 8 p.m. on a Friday, cold and rainy. But there are still plenty of people inside the stores of the VanGlen Center, an aging strip mall on the corner. Some are eating at a mariscos restaurant, others shopping at a T-Mobile store. A tax-preparing business is still busy.

The car is in the leftmost lane but suddenly swoops all the way to the right so that it's hugging the curb. The driver makes a right onto Glenoaks. The two men are now on the sidewalk, a few feet from the car.

The passenger-side window rolls down, and a .40-caliber handgun is pointed at them.

"Do you 'bang?!" a man from the car yells out.

Michael Kelly, 18 years old, answers: "No."

And immediately the man with the gun squeezes the trigger five times.

Kelly dives over the center's low, concrete wall. That is about when he is struck. His friend runs. Bullets rip through the air. One hits a nail salon, another the seafood restaurant. Customers flee.

The sedan peels away. Kelly is bleeding, a gunshot wound in his side. His friend, hit in the right leg, lopes away; they were only headed to his home.

Paramedics arrive in minutes, but Kelly dies in the parking lot.

No witness has seen the car since. Or at least no one has told police they've seen it. No one seems to know who killed Michael Kelly.

‘People talk’

The entire shooting lasted just seconds, and it all happened right beneath a surveillance camera the Los Angeles Police Department installed on top of a 50-foot-tall pole that holds the traffic signal on the intersection’s southeast corner.

And yet there is no footage of this shooting – everything happened near the base of the pole, squarely in the camera’s blind spot.

There’s footage of Kelly and his friend getting off of a bus at the Van Nuys/Glenoaks stop, then walking across the street. The sedan can be seen approaching the intersection, and footage shows it fleeing.

Rains that night left the area misty. No one, including FBI agents, has been able to get a license-plate number for the car.

Plenty of people saw the killing and its aftermath. At least one person tended to Kelly before paramedics arrived.

“There were definitely people there,” said Detective Eloy Navarro, who works for the Homicide Bureau in LAPD’s Valley Division. “A witness was actually parked in the parking lot facing Van Nuys, right on the corner there – she saw Michael Kelly jump over the wall. He jumped right in front of her car.

“She saw the muzzle flash,” Navarro said. “She sees a black car, then she ducks down. She’s freaking out.”

In 2019, across the entire division – LAPD’s largest by geographic area – 52 people were victims of homicide. Besides the Kelly case, the Valley detectives say, all of the rest have been solved.

Valley detectives even solved a few from the year prior, sending their clearance rate – the number police use to track how many crimes they’re getting off of their desks – to above 100% for 2019.

(This year, so far, has been a tougher one for the detectives, whose solve rate is about 50 percent on 45 homicides.)

Detectives attribute their success in part to the residents here who, compared to other parts of the city where gang violence is a more intractable problem, tend to provide information more freely.

“People talk in the Valley,” said Detective Mark O’Donnell, who leads Navarro’s unit.

To help with the Kelly case, LAPD has offered a \$50,000 reward for information leading to an arrest and a conviction.

Lt. Jim Gavin, at an August press conference to drum up witnesses concerning the murder of Kelly and two others, insisted Kelly was not a member of a gang. Detectives still don't know if his killing was a case of mistaken identity. The friend he was walking with was a member of a gang, Detective Navarro said.

"I don't know," Navarro said. "Did they recognize his friend from somewhere else? That's one of the big questions."

Navarro said he thinks it's likely the suspects recognized Kelly's friend as they crossed the street. Kelly was wearing a San Francisco 49ers hat – one of Pacoima's local gangs uses the 49ers symbol as its own.

Another unlucky break in the case is that detectives have been unable to match the bullets fired to another known gun. Navarro said data obtained from forensic tests of the bullet fragments was uploaded to a national database that tracks guns used in crimes. There was no match.

Kelly was adopted when he was just an infant, his last name, initially Gamboa, switching to the family name. His adoptive parents homeschooled him for most of his life, but for his final year he enrolled in a public magnet school.

"There, he met friends that he never met before," Navarro said. "And they were friends that were part of the wrong crowd."

'Things we didn't want them exposed to'

Randall and Ronnell Kelly are sitting in the shade of a patio in the middle of their sprawling property. The weather in the Valley has been sweltering for weeks. But a light breeze brings cool air.

They're just miles from where they grew up, in Pacoima in what's now called San Fernando Gardens, the Valley's only public-housing project, which sits next to a park.

"We called ourselves park rats," Randall Kelly said.

Both of their families eventually moved out and bought homes in the neighborhoods immediately surrounding the projects before moving to Lake View Terrace in the '70s.

Largely, both have lived in the northeast Valley their entire lives. Both grew up in large families. Randall has 13 siblings.

Their mothers knew each other, and their siblings were frequent guests at each other's houses. The couple married in 1989.

The Kellys have two other children, both adults. Foster care was not immediately something they were interested in. But as soon as they began researching the system and contacting foster agencies, they started getting calls.

"For some reason, they offered kids to us right away," Randall Kelly said.

The couple ended up fostering Michael and his birth sister. They adopted Michael when he was just a year old. The birth sister was adopted by another family at the couple's church. The two siblings remained close.

Michael and the sister have six other siblings, all who also went through the L.A. County foster system, who they also stayed in contact with.

From an early age, Michael was an athlete.

"He was a sports kid," Ronnell Kelly said. "He was good at any and every sport. Baseball, basketball, golf, flag football, football. He could swing a golf club at 2 – that was pretty impressive."

"He was awesome at volleyball," Randall Kelly.

Michael loved to fish, and he loved to cook.

"He could make a mean smoothie," Randall said with a chuckle. "He would just make stuff up."

The Kellys started homeschooling their kids around the time they adopted Michael.

"I know what high school was like, and it was only getting worse as time went along," Randall Kelly said. "You can get exposed to a lot of things we didn't want them exposed to."

Michael was homeschooled every year until the 12th grade, when he attended Sylmar Biotech Health Academy. Upon graduating, he and his birth sister agreed to enlist in the U.S. Marine Corps. He was sent to Camp Pendleton for boot camp.

After about six weeks, however, an ulcer Michael developed as a child flared up, and he was medically discharged.

That crushed him, his parents said.

The sudden exit left him with little direction. He tried half a dozen odd jobs – he worked part time at golf courses and at a small real estate business, and at one point delivered meat for a company in downtown L.A. He eventually landed an apprenticeship with a plumber.

And he was considering taking college courses so he could reenlist in the Marines, this time as an officer.

The Kellys were in Paris on vacation the night of the shooting. They got a call from Michael's girlfriend telling them what happened.

"It was Saturday morning our time," Randall Kelly said. "She told us, 'Mike's been shot. Mike's dead.'"

The couple made arrangements from their hotel room.

"We stayed there," Randall Kelly said. "We planned a funeral from half a world away."

Investigation continues

There is still much that the detectives assigned to Michael Kelly's case don't know.

They don't know what kind of car the suspects were driving. All they know is that the vehicle was a black or dark-colored sedan. After the shooting, the car continued on Glenoaks and disappeared into the darkness.

"It wasn't a red Camaro or anything," Navarro said. "It would be good to identify the car. Even further, we have to identify who pulled the trigger. Getting the car would be a clue to getting to that person."

They don't know for sure how many people were inside the car, but evidence seems to point to two: the driver and one passenger who fired the gun.

All five bullet casings were found in the street after the shooting, indicating that the passenger leaned out of the car's right window, extended the gun out and fired all of the shots that way.

The bullet that hit Michael struck his side, then travelled through his chest and punctured one of his lungs. He died in the parking lot.

Navarro and other detectives interviewed Kelly's friend in the hospital. They brought in an artist to draw a sketch of the gunman. But the only description the friend gave was that the suspect was a Hispanic man.

'Waiting for a conclusion'

The Kellys said they do not expect a break in the case any time soon. But they hope someone comes forward to identify who killed their son.

"I think we're still waiting for a conclusion," Randall Kelly said. "I think we'll always be waiting for a conclusion."

Michael's funeral was at their Baptist church.

Randall Kelly has worked for the city's Recreation and Parks Department for more than three decades, and served on a neighborhood council for a few years. He has many ties in the community, especially to the youth who make use of the city's parks.

"People talk," he said. "People know things."

In the meantime, Ronnell Kelly said, she has forgiven the person who did this to her son. She still wants the gunman to be caught: "We don't want anyone else to die senselessly."

She said the couple's faith is helping the family heal.

"We believe Mike is in heaven," Ronnell Kelly said. "We believe that."

LAPD asks that if you have information on the case to call the Valley Homicide Bureau at 818-374-9550.

Woman accused of running over Holocaust survivor in San Fernando Valley has led a tabloid life

By Josh Cain

April 2, 2020

[Story link](#)

Who is Joyce Bernann McKinney?

To the family of 91-year-old Gennady Bolotsky, McKinney is a 69-year-old woman accused of running over and killing the Holocaust survivor from Ukraine with her truck as he walked his dog in the San Fernando Valley last summer.

To the Los Angeles County mental-health system, she's the patient it received after a judge ruled her mentally incompetent to stand trial.

British tabloid readers of the 1970s, well, to them McKinney was a former Miss Wyoming, the woman behind the so-called Manacled Mormon case in which she was accused of flying to London and kidnapping a Mormon missionary she was infatuated with before the charges went away.

More than a decade ago, she popped up in the news again, this time as tabloid and mainstream-media fodder for reportedly hiring a South Korean firm for \$50,000-plus to clone her dead pit bull Booger from skin cells, a move that reaped her five Booger puppies.

Hers is indeed a flamboyant tale, a wild wave of a life that has left its mark on others.

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In a 2010 documentary, "Tabloid," parts of McKinney's life play out over 87 minutes – the slices about the Manacled Mormon case and her public re-emergence years later as the owner of the five cloned pit bulls.

She is a willing participant of the film: bubbly, confident, bright.

Directed by Oscar-winner Errol Morris, "Tabloid" has McKinney narrating her early days as a North Carolina girl and then as a Wyoming beauty queen who met and fell in love with Kirk Anderson when both attended Brigham Young University in Utah.

In September 1977, "Tabloid" explains, with Anderson on his Mormon mission in London, McKinney followed him there with an accomplice.

Using a fake handgun and chloroform, the documentary says banking off of news reports at time, the pair allegedly kidnapped Anderson outside a Mormon meeting house, taking him to a cottage and handcuffing him to a bed – with London police later arresting her.

She posted bail and, while awaiting trial, became a sensation in British tabloids.

While in London, in 1978, she was photographed with Keith Moon of The Who, one of the world's all-time drummers, at a premiere of the film "Saturday Night Fever." They are cheek to cheek, with one of McKinney's arms around his neck as if she had pulled him close.

McKinney and the accomplice, a friend, slipped out of the country. But, The New York Times and other outlets reported, authorities ending up declining to pursue their extraditions.

"I mean, I could never understand the public's fascination with my love life," McKinney says in the "Tabloid" doc. "I'm not a movie star. I'm just a person, a human being that was caught in an extraordinary circumstance."

In 2011, McKinney attended a question-and-answer session in Salt Lake City following a screening of "Tabloid" with a pit bull in tow.

"I had no idea they were going to do this trashy movie," she told the audience, according to the Salt Lake City Tribune.

Hollywood, she figured, might tell her story as the love story she preferred.

"Kirsten Dunst is running around all over Hollywood saying, 'I have to have this part!'" she said that day. "I'm more a Katie Heigl type – she's an ex-Mormon like me."

McKinney ended up suing the "Tabloid" filmmakers for defamation, invasion of privacy and fraud.

The filmmakers showed the court a release McKinney signed. Their lawyer also argued that she was a limited public figure and that they were covered under the First Amendment to document her story.

The California Court of Appeal tossed out the suit in October 2013, records show: Judge James Steele found the making of the documentary "was undeniably ... defendants' exercise of their free-speech rights."

Early in the project, producer Mark Lipson recalled, McKinney gave him a tour of her Riverside home – she wanted to show him her truck, which she said had been broken into with research materials for a book about her life stolen.

Lipson took photos of the truck and of parts of her property. Some of those images appear in the final credits of “Tabloid.”

McKinney was living in “borderline squalor,” he said. “Her day-in, day-out living just seemed to be kind of extreme.”

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Then, once again, McKinney slipped from public view.

A couple of years ago, authorities in Los Angeles County started coming in contact with her.

“I’m very familiar with Joyce McKinney,” said Stacie Wood-Levin, a senior animal-control officer for the Burbank Animal Shelter. “We’ve had many check-condition calls on the animals over the years.”

The calls came in, Wood-Levin said, from those who reported they had seen dogs confined in crates in McKinney’s white pickup with a camper cover.

McKinney had named the five puppies after herself and the South Korean scientists who created them: Booger Hong, Booger Lee, Booger McKinney, Booger Park, and Booger Ra.

Three of those pit bulls would end up at the Burbank shelter, with two euthanized for health and behavioral problems. It is unclear what happened to the fourth and fifth pit bulls.

Just Booger Park, perhaps the last of the world’s first commercially cloned pet dogs, waits these days at the shelter to be adopted.

He had serious behavior issues around other dogs. At 11 years old, he has health concerns, too.

To the shelter workers, he’s just Park.

“Park has a sensitive stomach, but he loves to eat, and he loves to play,” said Stacey Deveikis, a shelter volunteer. “Behavior-wise, he’s very sweet.”

The shelter’s website hints at Park’s past:

“I am a male, gray pit bull terrier mix. The shelter staff think I am about 11 years old. I have been at the shelter since Jun 21, 2019,” it says.

“Owner unable to care (of him) any longer. Very sweet and affectionate boy. Really spry for his age.”

A smiley face emoticon.

“He sadly lived in a crate for the last several years, so he will need help with some training/house-breaking. Would do just fine in an apartment, even a studio apartment as long as you have a nice cozy couch for him to nap on.”

◆ ◆ ◆

At 5:35 a.m. on June 17, surveillance video from the Valley Village neighborhood caught Bolotsky getting struck while walking his small, white dog across Magnolia Boulevard.

In the video, the truck plows into the 91-year-old while he is in the middle of a crosswalk. The driver, later determined by police to be McKinney, pauses for a moment, then continues on.

Bolotsky’s dog is hit, too, but ended up being OK.

The suspect was gone.

Bolotsky’s death made headlines, with his family appearing on television. There were shots of the suspect’s truck, too.

“I had over 20 leads to follow up on the next day,” LAPD Detective Holly Fredo said.

On June 21, a tip that came in was pretty good: There was a truck police might be interested in parked near Hollywood Burbank Airport.

The hit-and-run was just one of dozens of cases Detective Fredo was working. Not all are resolved within days.

Fredo and another detective immediately went out to take a look at the truck.

Approaching the pickup, the detectives could see McKinney in the driver’s seat. They pondered how they would get the woman out – then she stepped out on her own.

Apparently unaware of the detectives, McKinney dropped her pants and urinated as the officers looked on, Fredo recalled. The detectives then got out of their car and walked up and started questioning her.

Detective Fredo said the woman was evasive, avoiding questions about whether she frequented Valley Village.

The detective said she learned from employees of the Pizza Hut just west of the crash scene that McKinney was a regular there. And security camera footage showed her at the restaurant the night before the incident.

“She claimed she didn’t know anything about (the crash),” Fredo said. “She did admit she was the only driver of her vehicle.”

Fredo and the other traffic detective took McKinney into custody based on two warrants, one related to suspicion of battery: McKinney had gotten into an altercation while trying to use a shower at a local LA Fitness, Fredo said.

The three remaining dogs were taken to the Burbank shelter.

◆ ◆ ◆

In August, weeks before the first mental-competency hearing, at the Los Angeles Police Department’s Valley Operations Bureau, Fredo talked about the case with a reporter.

The detective said she believed McKinney was narcissistic: In previous encounters with police, McKinney would tell them about a potential book and a hoped-for feature movie about her life, conversations picked up by officers’ body-worn cameras.

McKinney had brought up the book idea to Fredo, too, during the arrest. McKinney was coherent, and chose her words carefully, the detective said.

“What she was saying was making sense,” Fredo said. “If anything, I don’t know that she had the ability to care about anybody but herself.”

At the Burbank Animal Shelter on Wood-Levin’s desk sat two hand-written letters, about 20 pages each. McKinney sent them from an L.A. County jail.

In the letters, McKinney says she’s being held against her will, and that she wants to reunite with her dogs, which she names.

“She’s very intelligent,” Wood-Levin said. “She constantly plays the victim. She has not acknowledged what’s she done in any of the letters.

“She just says she’s been falsely accused and is being held captive by the Sheriff’s Department.”

◆ ◆ ◆

Fifteen or so years ago, Bolotsky was hit in that same Valley Village crosswalk.

Neither that first incident, nor his age, kept him down.

Family members, after the fatal hit-and-run, shared videos of Bolotsky dancing at his 90th birthday.

“He was supposed to live to 100 or more,” a son told KABC7.

Bolotsky had survived Nazi Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. He fled his native Ukraine and settle in the United States.

He lived just around the corner from the crosswalk and would take his small dog, Leelah, for walks.

Bolotsky's family took over care of Leelah, the LAPD detective said. But the dog clearly missed her owner.

◆ ◆ ◆

On July 2, the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office filed against McKinney one felony count each of assault with a deadly weapon, hit-and-run resulting in death, and vehicular manslaughter with gross negligence.

Two days later, records show, McKinney's public defender declared doubt about her mental competency to stand trial. Twenty days after that, a judge ordered a mental-competency hearing for McKinney.

And on Sept. 9, in front of Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Robert Harrison, McKinney's second public defender, William Edwards, said at first he believed some of the details she told him about her life could be “delusions.”

“I wasn't sure if some of the things she was saying were true or not,” Edwards told the judge.

When her lawyer looked for himself, he found how much of it really was.

“I encourage you to Google her name,” Edwards said. “She's a fascinating figure in our culture.”

Judge Harrison declared McKinney mentally unfit to stand trial and ordered her housed in a mental-health facility.

McKinney was taken to the Metropolitan State Hospital, a sprawling, leafy 162-acre facility nestled in the heart of Norwalk.

In February, a judge in Van Nuys ruled, once again, she was not competent.

McKinney's next hearing is scheduled for August.

What has changed since the Metrolink crash in Chatsworth 10 years ago

By Josh Cain

September 8, 2018

[Story link](#)

Metrolink 111 was right on time.

The commuter train pulled out of Union Station just after 3:30 p.m. on Sept. 12, 2008, carrying mostly workers and college students heading home on a Friday afternoon.

An engineer and a conductor, both contracted through Connex Railroad, were at the reins as the train rolled northwest through the San Fernando Valley on its way to the Moorpark station on the Ventura County rail line.

Though he knew he was prohibited from using his cell phone while in the locomotive's cab, 46-year-old engineer Robert Sanchez, throughout the journey, texted a friend, a teenager from Chatsworth who loved trains. Twice before, federal records show, he had been spotted on the phone and warned.

Sanchez apparently didn't notice the yellow signal, before pulling into the Chatsworth station, telling him he might need to stop up ahead. Or the red one just beyond that station and before the route switches from two tracks to one.

He was to stop and wait, giving up the single track.

This train tunnel is near the site of the crash in Chatsworth, CA.(photo by Andy Holzman)
Barreling eastbound was the Leesdale Local, a Union Pacific freight train. Emerging from a tunnel, its crew spotted Metrolink 111 – and engaged the emergency brakes two seconds before impact.

At 4:22 p.m., Metrolink 111 collided with the Leesdale Local, each train traveling at about 40 mph.

Passengers, emergency officials and locals rushed to the mangled metal and fire to help. Dazed and bloodied victims wandered away from the three coaches. Bodies had to be pulled from the twisted wreckage.

In all, 25 were killed, including Sanchez. None of the dead were from the freight train. And 135 others were injured.

A decade later, the area is again pristine, here on a bend in this part of Chatsworth, a corner of rustic Stoney Point Park and over the fence from a school. Plenty of pain remains, but at least changes were made to reduce the odds that such a tragedy will ever happen again.

‘Blood on their hands’

Kipp Landis just has to turn his right forearm for a reminder. A long scar marks where his surgeon cut into his wrist to put shattered bones back together again.

The doctor told him the effect of the impact was similar to what would have happened if he had fallen off of a three-story building directly onto his wrist.

“He did five hours of surgery,” Landis said. “He told me it was just like putting baby powder back together.”

Years, and hundreds of physical therapy sessions later, Landis was able to regain half of the strength in his forearm.

A 52-year-old lawyer and longtime planning commissioner for Moorpark, he was one of the few to survive Metrolink 111’s first passenger car. The crash telescoped the train’s locomotive into that car, pushing a wall of metal two-thirds of the way through.

Besides his wrist, many bones in Landis’ upper body were broken – every rib, two bones in his back, his shoulder, and his right arm.

Throughout his recovery, Landis marked milestones, such as being able to throw a baseball again at a Pepperdine University alumni game.

“I now sort of tell history and time based on the event,” he said. “Was it before the accident, or after the accident?”

Keith Millhouse was a member of the Metrolink board representing Ventura County when the collision occurred. He was elected chairman three months later.

Improving Metrolink, to ensure a similar crash could never happen again, consumed his life for years.

He counts Landis as a good friend and knows the mother of Maria Elena Villalobos, an 18-year-old student at the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising in downtown L.A. who was killed.

“It was absolutely a gut punch to both Simi Valley and Moorpark,” said Millhouse, now 58. “It hit so hard, and so close to home.”

Improvements on the railway

Every weekday, about 20,000 people from all over Southern California hop aboard the 25-year-old rail service's trains, often for the long commutes to and from work. Last fiscal year, Metrolink's budget was \$243 million, about 35 percent of that coming from fares. The rest was paid through subsidies from L.A., Orange, San Bernardino, Riverside and Ventura counties.

Like other railways, Metrolink was slow to adopt positive train control, technology that both Millhouse and National Transportation Safety Board officials said could have prevented the Chatsworth crash.

The crash prompted the NTSB to set a deadline for all passenger trains and freight trains carrying hazardous materials to install positive train control by 2015. Metrolink met that deadline in June of that year. According to Millhouse, that set the standard for other railways to do so across the nation. Some railways have continued to request delays. The current deadline is this December.

Now, Metrolink's system links onboard computers on each of its trains with its communication network, allowing its dispatch centers and centralized computer system to know the locations of all of its locomotives. That helps the system predict if a collision is about to occur.

And the onboard computers can take over automatically if an engineer stops responding to warnings of an impending crash, or if the train is going too fast.

Union Pacific followed, in 2017, adopted the system for all of the tracks it shares with Metrolink trains.

Other safety upgrades were adopted immediately after the Chatsworth crash. Millhouse pushed for the installation of cameras in every locomotive cab to ensure engineers weren't distracted. And signals across the region were replaced with brighter LED lights.

Before the Chatsworth collision, after a 2005 crash in Glendale, Metrolink replaced its fleet of cars with new models featuring crumple zones, areas at the front and rear of the car designed to absorb the force of a collision. The Chatsworth crash also led Metrolink to install tables that crumple more easily, after more rigid tables crushed the abdomens of some victims in the 2008 collision.

The technology to automate some processes of the tracking and operating of trains had been around for decades. But many railways balked at the cost, leading to a delay that attorney Ron Goldman, a partner at Baum, Hedlund, Aristei & Goldman, which represented some of the Metrolink crash victims, called "outrageous."

Goldman said the reason for delays came down to prioritizing money over the lives of passengers.

“Every time they (ask for a delay), there’s blood on their hands,” Goldman said.

(In 2011, a judge approved a \$200 million settlement for 122 families and individuals affected by the Chatsworth crash.)

Millhouse said finding other railways refusing to attack the problem with the same “tenacity” as Metrolink was frustrating: “People have died as a result.”

Despite satisfaction with his eight years on the Metrolink board, the Chatsworth accident has haunted Millhouse.

“I just somehow wish that everything could be reset and we could change the outcome,” he said. “That’s what’s frustrating. There’s not a day that goes by that I don’t think about the people on the train, and the victims and their families.”

‘Every time you heard the train, you jumped’

That afternoon, Carol Shibel was one of three staff members still at Chatsworth Hills Academy, that school over the fence, which serves pre-kindergarten through eighth grade on a sprawling campus with ample green spaces and small wood buildings.

A field at the school became a makeshift triage area, where injured passengers were taken. The campus itself became a temporary command center for 24 hours.

For about one year, students were not allowed to use the field — officials feared the ground was hazardous from the blood of the wounded.

A recent day, through a line of trees on a small hill on the campus, Shibel pointed to the crash site — 10 years ago, it was easier to see, when the trees were still small. A whistle sounded from an approaching train, and a Union Pacific freight train rumbled by.

On the day of the crash, Shibel, a math teacher, sat with about 20 students inside a building on campus for an hour, trying to keep them calm while not revealing too much about what had just happened. Another teacher went to the triage area and sat with victims for hours.

“It’s hard, it’s extremely hard,” said Shibel, who now is the middle school principal in addition to teaching math. “For a while, every time you heard the train, you jumped.”

Mitch Englander, then a chief of staff for L.A. Councilman Greig Smith and a reserve police officer, was one of the nearby residents who went to the scene after hearing a massive explosion.

He and a friend jumped a wall separating homes from the tracks. They found the fiery freight train and the mangled Metrolink 111, and victims pleading for help.

"It was just chaos," Englander said. "There were bodies strewn everywhere. People were stuck in the train and screaming."

Englander and others rushed to the Metrolink train and began pulling victims, dead and alive, from the wreckage. As they found the bodies of the dead, they set up an area to place them until the coroner could get there. Some prayed over the bodies and administered last rites.

For the first year after the crash, Englander was often unable to sleep through the night, and he obsessively searched online for information about each of the dead.

In recent weeks, Englander has been reaching out to families of those victims to invite them to a memorial on Wednesday at a three-acre horse ranch in the shadow of Stoney Point, just south of the site of the collision.

The conversations have been emotional, he said, and recounting his memories of the day have brought back intense feelings.

"The imagery is so vivid," he said. "It's not just telling a story of something that happened. It feels like it happened last night."

Pig carcasses, lipstick and lots of dirt: L.A. coroner's office gives investigators tips on finding hidden bodies

By Josh Cain

Sept. 19, 2019

[Story link](#)

Out of three waist-deep holes in the ground came a slew of macabre discoveries.

Lipstick. Then sunglasses and a dog collar, followed by dirty ribs.

After a little more excavating, the teams of crime-scene investigators, homicide detectives and others found nylon stockings filled with additional bones.

Then came the skulls.

After nearly a half-day of digging, measuring, and sweeping away fine layers of dirt, they had unearthed, among other things, piles of bones they could use to put the crime victims they had found back together again.

The three bodies, found by about 40 students earlier this month in a forested patch of Griffith Park, were real.

The crimes, say murder and hiding bodies, were just pretend. The students in this hands-on class taught by instructors from the Los Angeles County coroner's office were searching for pig carcasses, buried months ago for the coroner's annual Skeletal Recovery Workshop.

"We were calling this one Miss Piggy," said Michelle Lee, an investigator in the coroner's office.

She pointed into a hole, where the remains of a pig were buried with earrings and nylons.

"Porky's over there," she said, gesturing to a nearby grave.

The week-long program, in classroom settings and outside spread over 40 hours, covers bone identification and grave-site processing.

Other topics on the syllabus: "human decomposition, mass fatalities, coroner-related law, prosecution of cases involving recovered remains, bones used in rituals, and human-remains-detection canines."

The demand for these skills is huge, said Brian Elias, Los Angeles County's chief of coroner investigations.

Needed are savvy investigators with experience scouring patches of dirt to find decomposed remains – without destroying anything of value – and who can differentiate leftover animal bones from human ones.

“There’s a lot of skeletal remains that are found or buried bodies that occur in this county,” Elias said. “I think more so than people realize.”

Instructors with the L.A. coroner’s office have been teaching the Skeletal Recovery Workshop for the last 15 or so years, drawing students from local and state agencies – and beyond. The list of agencies that ask to send a worker or two each year grows.

Sheriff’s departments, other coroner’s offices, crime-scene units and county and state attorney’s offices in addition to arson-investigation units are repeat customers. The cost for the students, covered by their agencies, is \$550 each.

This time, the 14 law-enforcement agencies included the Orange County District Attorney’s Office, the Riverside County Sheriff’s Department, and the Torrance and the Los Angeles forces.

The workshop is one of just a handful of such programs in the U.S. Few coroner’s departments are big enough to devote multiple investigators to teaching a week of instruction. Some of the other programs that specialize in teaching how human bodies decompose don’t offer the same hands-on experience.

L.A. County’s workshop “directly relates to real-world” scenarios a detective or coroner’s investigator would find at an actual grave site, Elias said, with injury patterns and locations mirroring actual cases.

“How do you search? How do you dig? How do you collect evidence?” he said. “How do you document these things, and how do you potentially present a case? We go all the way from the beginning to the end.”

Getting dirty

In three teams of a dozen or so each, the students trekked into a leafy, secluded glen in Griffith Park in search of hidden graves.

The instructors might guide them a bit, but in many respects they were on their own, putting to the test lessons they learned the first three days.

They searched for a recently disturbed patch of dirt, or an area where vegetation had been cut away. Or they could deploy a metal bar with a pointed end to poke into the ground to find objects.

Once they found the right spot, the digging began.

It was difficult work – mounds of dirt were hauled out and carted away to sifting stations. On a sweltering day, the work can be especially exhausting.

“What most people don’t understand is how hard it really is to bury a body,” Elias said.

The first sight, or smell, of the body picked everyone’s energy back up.

“I got a whiff a moment ago,” one instructor said.

“Whoa! What’s that?” asked a student, prone, with her shoulders and head over the hole as she brushed away dirt – from something.

“Looks like part of a belt,” another student said.

“It’s fun when you find something,” Nani Cholakians, another L.A. County coroner’s investigator and workshop instructor, said about this game students play to learn. “When you’re going down two feet and there’s nothing but dirt, it can be pretty disappointing.”

Some of the techniques the students learned come straight from archaeology. Before working for the coroner’s office, Cholakians participated in archaeological digs in the Caucasus mountain range that borders Europe and Asia while studying at UCLA.

“The site I was working at was over 4,000 years old,” she recalled. “The preservation of the bones was incredible. All of these are methods taken from the world of archaeology, but we have financial constraints and time constraints. (Coroner’s investigators) have to do this in a day or two.”

A student lowered a plumb bob to measure the grave’s depth. More dirt hauling and sifting, until finally the students uncovered a skull and a rib cage.

Once the remains were out of the ground, there was more work to be done. An organic jigsaw puzzle, the students laid out all of the bones on a white sheet, reassembling them to create the figure of the pig.

The next day, the teams would present their techniques and conclusions to classmates and instructors, and disclose what they found in their grave sites.

“Going methodically – that is definitely the way to do it,” said Shelly Luna, a San Diego Police Department homicide detective, while surveying her team’s grave.

Luna has been a San Diego cop for 22 years, following her father who had served in the department. Some of the lessons from the week would never have occurred to her.

“We learned about bugs that we may come across to actually tell how long somebody has been deceased,” she said. “Just putting all that stuff together, it helps us think outside the box. Some of this stuff is not always that obvious.”

The draw to the work

The nature of the work, combining science with criminal investigations, is what attracted Lee, one of the coroner’s investigators and instructors, to the field.

“I wanted to be a detective, but ... I wanted something more science-y, where I’d be in a lab,” she said.

Growing up, Lee was fascinated with crime novels. Even after she interned in the coroner’s office, it wasn’t apparent to her loved ones that working in a coroner’s office was her calling.

“I talked about it with my family,” she said. “When I finally got hired (at the L.A. County coroner’s office), they were like, ‘Oh, you were serious about that?’ “

The Skeletal Recovery Workshop is designed for those comfortable with working around death. Most students pass without much trouble, but there have been a few cases of them not making it through the course once the skeletal recovery begins in earnest, Elias said.

For a career with intestinal fortitude as a prerequisite, constant death still can be mentally draining. Setting limits is important, said Robert Fierro, another L.A. County coroner’s investigator.

“There’s no nice way to tell somebody that someone’s dead, but you have to do it,” he said.

It helps when co-workers support and comfort one another.

Fierro has worked in the coroner’s office for 30 years, all in the Antelope Valley. He said he had no interest in the work when a job came open up all those years ago.

“My wife said I’d be perfect for it,” he said, laughing.

Fierro either knew how to compartmentalize going in, or he learned to accomplish it.

“I know all day long I’m going to be dealing with death,” he said. “But when I’m off, I’m off. ... You can’t associate yourself with it for too long.”

Preparing the graves

Getting the makeshift graves ready for the students requires nearly as much, if not more, work than it takes the professionals to dig them back up.

First, the coroner's instructors get the carcasses from a local pig farm, which sets aside a few animals that have died from sickness or old age.

Showing what a stab wound looks like after months of decomposition means giving the pig carcass a stab wound. To provide a body with a gunshot wound, the pig carcass is shot.

Finally, the instructors pick their spots and dig big holes to put each of the pigs in. That all has to be done months in advance to give the carcasses time to decompose.

But before the pigs are buried, the instructors round up evidence to go with the bodies, dressing them in much the same way a human body would be if one were hastily dumped in a hole.

Socks, nylons and other clothes go on the dead pigs, with items such as glasses, a wallet, a driver license, a flashlight. A dog collar that the victim might have stuffed into his pocket.

Sometimes, Elias will go to a 99¢ Only Store for the clothing.

Other times ...

"Some of them are probably wearing my clothes down there," Elias said.

Tow truck drivers are out there working one of America's most dangerous jobs

By Josh Cain

Sept. 6, 2019

[Story link](#)

Jose Francisco Rael Jr.'s tow truck lumbered over to the side of the westbound 60 Freeway. It was rush hour, and a beat-up Chevrolet sedan was on the shoulder with a flat.

Rael paused before opening his door, peeked over his shoulder to ensure no vehicles would sideswipe him and, once out on the asphalt, turned around.

He walked backward to the front of his truck, giving him at least a tiny chance to jump from trouble.

As he crouched over asphalt, jacking up the Chevy to replace the tire, he was at his most vulnerable. Just a few feet away, cars and semi-trucks hustled by.

Rael was paying attention to all of them – even if the drivers were not paying attention to him.

“I can feel their wind,” he had said earlier when asked if he knew when trouble was too close.

Sometimes, tow truck drivers get what they call a “tap on the shoulder” – brushed by a side mirror. Many others suffer worse.

All this makes driving tow trucks, especially on freeways, one of the most dangerous jobs in the country.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – in a rare study focused on the trade – determined that in five years ending in 2016, 191 tow truck drivers were killed nationwide.

That worked out to 42.9 fatal injuries per 100,000 workers.

Only pilots, roofers and fishermen had higher death rates if that statistic is compared to figures of other jobs considered by the Bureau of Labor Statistics for 2017.

For firefighters, according to the BLS, the rate was 8.9 deaths per 100,000 workers. For police, it was 12.9 deaths.

“First responders all get hit – firefighters, EMTs, Caltrans, Highway Patrol,” said California Highway Patrol Officer Kathlene New, who is based in Orange County. “It just seems like tow trucks are getting hit more frequently.”

Lawmakers have tried to help. Every state in the nation has adopted its own “Slow Down, Move Over” law, California in 2007.

It requires drivers to slow down and move over a full lane if they can do so safely when they see an emergency vehicle with flashing lights on a freeway shoulder.

“Some drivers, if they see a firetruck on the freeway, they know they have to move over,” said Patrick Sampson, the manager of motor services for the Orange County Transportation Authority, which oversees the local Freeway Service Patrol.

“But if they see a tow truck, they don’t. They don’t associate the appearance of a tow truck with safety.”

Injuries and worse

CHP Officer New supervises tow truck drivers in Orange County’s Freeway Service Patrol, a cousin of what Rael works for in Los Angeles County.

These specialized tow trucker drivers, funded by the state and the county that has them, pull over for every stopped motorist they find, giving stranded drivers a tank of gas or a tow off of the freeway for free, aiming to keep overall traffic moving along.

“We haven’t lost anybody, but I had a driver get hit so hard that he never came back to work,” New said of Orange County’s fleet.

That driver was struck a few years ago while in the middle of the 5 Freeway, just south of the 91, when trying to tow a broken-down car to safety. Another vehicle slammed into the tow truck, sending him careening into the truck’s back window, head first.

He ended up with just cuts and scrapes – but that was enough.

New ticks off other near-disasters: A driver who got hit on his elbow, then narrowly missed a second strike as the car spun around. Another struck as he was stretching to grab a bucket in the lanes.

“I’ve had an operator who carefully tried to open his door, when he was sideswiped,” she said. “I’ve had an operator who got his foot run over when he was assisting a driver.”

It can get much, much worse out there.

Mark Tornow, who owns and drives for Finish Line Towing & Transport in Long Beach, knows all of this too well.

He lost an employee, in 2012.

Faapuna Manu, a 27-year-old father of three, was changing a tire on a darkened Cherry Avenue onramp of the 405 Freeway when a drunk driver in a 2005 Toyota struck him.

A recent morning, from behind the wheel of one of his trucks as he beelined to rescue a woman stranded by a flat tire in a sushi shop parking lot, Tornow recalled the crash that killed "Mac."

"Mac was on the side of the road changing a tire at 2:28 in the morning," Tornow said.

An EMT driving home from a holiday party plowed into the tow truck, and then the Mercedes Benz, right where Mac was kneeling down in the roadway.

"(The driver) spun out, then he hit the wall," Tornow said. "When he woke up and saw what he did, he took some glass and tried to kill himself. ... It's dangerous out here."

'Like a bull's-eye'

In February, in Sausalito north of San Francisco, an AAA tow truck driver helping a motorist stranded on the 101 Freeway was killed when a passing pickup truck lost control in the rain and slammed into the tow truck, which hit the AAA driver standing on the other side, killing him.

In June, another AAA driver was killed, this time in Castaic, as he was helping a driver on the 5 Freeway: A passing semi-truck hit the driver and fled, with the semi's driver never found.

Erwin Mendoza Geremillo, a 47-year-old father from Castaic, was that AAA driver.

On June 29, he was buried at Forest Lawn Memorial Park, Hollywood Hills. Tow truck drivers from around the region attended his funeral.

On the road leading to the cemetery's central white chapel, surrounded by rolling green hills, a dozen tow trucks lined up on either side. The jumpsuit-clad drivers hopped out, gathered, then headed into the chapel.

Most did not know Mendoza. But many knew a driver like him who had been killed. All have had close calls themselves.

Not long before, Johnny Perez, a 45-year-old tow truck company owner from Baldwin Park, was aiding a stranded motorist on the 10 Freeway when a semi-truck sideswiped his tow truck, shearing off a side mirror.

"I saw the semi kind of veering," Perez, a former EMT, said near the parked tow trucks. "I jumped out of the way. If I wouldn't have moved, I would have been hit."

Mendoza's assignment that night, the overnight shift, is one many drivers dread.

"If it's not stop-and-go traffic, it's dangerous out there," said Ken Wilson, an owner and driver of Panorama Towing Service in Panorama City. "For the late shift, sometimes my guys don't even want to go out there."

"It's like rolling the dice."

A driver could get distracted, or misjudge the distance to the right shoulder. Or a drunk could come your way.

"We're like a bull's-eye," said Bill Rauh, a 61-year-old driver with Castaic Towing, Mendoza's employer.

He and others say drunk drivers tend to drift in the direction of lights, including the amber LEDs on their tow trucks. "They want to go toward the lights."

'It got close'

Tina Coffey, 47, is a rarity – a woman tow truck driver.

She and her husband, Steve, also a tow truck driver, own a towing company in Barstow and were in Hollywood Hills as well to honor Mendoza, who they didn't know.

The couple has eight children and step children – there's plenty to worry about if either gets injured or killed out on the road.

"It's like we're resigned to more deaths," she said. "But then something like this happens, and it reminds us that we're vulnerable."

Despite the danger, tow truck drivers keep driving.

"Why do I still drive?" Tornow said. "Well, I like it."

The industry is recession proof – in downturns, more people drive older cars, so tow services are needed more frequently. Some point out they like helping people.

Back on the 60 Freeway, Rael has just finished changing the Chevy's tire. He climbed back into the cab. Even though it's early in the day, it was already warm out, and he was drenched in sweat.

"It's constantly on my mind," he said of the possibility of getting hit. "Looking for someone drifting over, not paying attention. If I see it coming, just making sure I don't get hit."

On the passenger side of his dashboard is a copy of "Our Daily Bread" sitting next to a taped-in-place wooden crucifix.

Just a week before, a semi-truck barreling along the 605 Freeway forced Rael, on foot, to tuck into a safer spot.

"It got close, it got very close," he said. "He was drifting a little bit, and I go, 'Wait a minute, something's wrong.' "

Rael was sure the driver was looking at his cellphone.

"I saw him get back in (his lane), but he went like this."

Rael mimicked the driver, looking up from a hand and saying, "'Oh!'"