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A Bright Holiday, a Tragic Crash and Lingered Sorrow

By Mitch Lehman
San Marino Tribune

What Phil Raacke experienced one year ago this Saturday is still fresh in his mind.

Crispo, a 49-year-old English as a second language professor at Pasadena City College; his girlfriend, Marta Blanco; and the ever-present Niño had left their home in San Gabriel that Thursday morning and jogged toward San Marino, a familiar routine for the fitness aficionados. As Crispo and Niño crossed Huntington — Blanco trailed several yards behind — they were struck by the Mercedes and launched across the median and into the street. The Mercedes tore tire tracks through the median and clattered across four thankfully empty lanes before coming to rest approximately 100 feet beyond the point of impact. An investigation would later determine that two of the males Raacke saw were driving separate westbound cars at high rates of speed. Their vehicles collided, pushing the Mercedes into the median, where it struck and killed Crispo and his dog at 10:34 a.m.

The two then-17-year-olds, who live and attended school outside of San Marino, each pleaded guilty on Dec. 20 to felony vehicular manslaughter with gross negligence and were sentenced to serve in an alternative work services program, the juvenile equivalent to community labor. The driver of the Mercedes served 60 days in the program; the other driver, 30 days. Each was also required to complete a separate hospital and morgue volunteer program and remain on probation for an undetermined duration. A third male, also a juvenile, was later cleared in the investigation.



Photo courtesy Christy Neville

Saturday marks the one-year anniversary of the death of Pasadena City College professor Gabriel Crispo and his beloved Labrador retriever, Niño, who were killed in the Huntington Drive median by an automobile that was involved in a street race.

"Sometimes the only thing that helps me is that he is not alone, he is with Niño ... He loved him very much. I don't know why this happened, but they had to go together."

— Marta Blanco

She also hopes Crispo's legacy will continue and that a lesson can be learned through his tragic death.

"Hopefully, kids will see that this is not a game," Blanco said. "He lost his life because they decided to play without thinking of the consequences. I know his sister, mother and nephews are paying the consequences of this. His mother is never going to recover from this loss. I am certain about my pain. We are struggling every day to accept this loss and to understand that he is not with us anymore."

She has found some small solace in the fact that Crispo and Niño died together.

"Sometimes the only thing that helps me is that he is not alone, he is with Niño," Blanco said, her voice cracking. "He loved him very much. I don't know why this happened, but they had to go together."

Blanco has invited friends and acquaintances to gather at the death scene at 10:34 a.m. this Saturday, July 4, for a memorial service.

"Nothing is going to bring him back," Blanco said. "I feel lost. We had all of these plans. To retire early, to live in Argentina. Those plans are all gone."

Though the criminal matter was settled in Juvenile Court, a civil lawsuit has been filed on behalf of Crispo's mother, who lives in Argentina.

Attorney Mark Hiepler, representing the plaintiff, said in a phone interview he expects to complete depositions of the defendants in a matter of weeks.

Hiepler said he is hoping for a jury trial where he would seek compensation "for the wrongful, negligent and careless taking of a life."

"We will ask the jury to send a message and value life appropriately," said Hiepler. "We hope to deter negligent and careless acts and thereby save and preserve lives in the future."

A hearing for the two drivers is expected to take place later this month that will determine their progress in the sentencing. If so, Hiepler said he would hope to be in court by the end of the year.