

Father and Daughter Die in Crash

Palisadian-Post, March 04, 2004

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On Monday afternoon a tragic and inexplicable accident took the life of Palisadian Jeff Taylor, 36, and his 2-1/2-year-old daughter, Bayden. They died when the SUV Jeff was driving caught fire after becoming embedded inside a garage located across the alley behind the Methodist Church/preschool at Bowdoin and Via de la Paz.

Taylor had gone to the school to bring an umbrella to his wife Colette, who was participating in a cooking class with their son Preston, 4-1/2. After Jeff and Bayden left the school they returned to the car which was parked in the Methodist parking lot. For reasons unknown, the car, instead of backing up to exit the lot, lurched forward and rammed through the back stucco wall of the garage, where it came to a crashing halt and burst into flames.

Trapped inside the white 2002 Acura MDX 4 with no way to escape, the father and his daughter probably died instantly, firefighters told the Palisadian-Post.

'It was definitely a flash fire,' said LAFD Captain Will Alderson of Station 69. 'Originally we thought that it might have been caused by an erupted gas tank, but it was later found to be intact. Now we think the fire might have started in the front of the car. We do know the fire was gas-driven and spread quickly in such a narrow space.'

Alderson said seven firetrucks and 25 firefighters responded to the 911 call shortly after 2 p.m. When they arrived on the scene, the SUV, which had come to rest in the middle of the one-car garage, was already on fire, billowing black smoke, its license plate clearly visible from the parking lot. Not knowing yet if there were people trapped in the vehicle, firemen broke open the front door of the garage.

Flames immediately burst out, threatening the one-bedroom apartment above the garage as well as the two garages on either side, which were also being used for storage. Within minutes the fire was out. Firemen worked quickly to unload the stored items which had fallen on the hood of the vehicle, including a chair, a chandelier and some winter clothes.

Unable to determine through the blackened windshield if there were passengers in the car, firemen went around to the back of the garage and entered the vehicle through the rear window, which is when they discovered Taylor's body in the front seat. It was not until the car was pulled out of the garage some three hours later that they also discovered the child.

Just before the fire first broke out, Colette Taylor and her son Preston, one of 85 children enrolled in the Methodist preschool, were participating in an after-school cooking class in a classroom overlooking the parking lot. The children had just been presented with their cooking certificates and chef's hats with their names on them when the teacher, seeing smoke, quickly called for the room to be evacuated. The chocolate marshmallows and sugar cookies the children had made for their parents would have to wait.

One of the mothers, seeing flames, called 911.



Photo / Rich Schmitt, Staff Photographer

Firefighters tackle the blaze that broke out on Monday afternoon behind the Methodist preschool at Bowdoin and Via de la Paz.

Evacuated to the front of the church on Via de la Paz at about 2:25 p.m., Colette and Preston stood in the rain with the other parents, students and teachers while firefighters battled the blaze. After about 30 minutes they were told they could leave. Apparently Colette and her son walked home, just a half-a-block away. By this time helicopters were overhead and several television news crews had arrived.

One mother, who wished not to be identified, told the Post that it was only when firemen allowed her to retrieve her car in the parking lot, which was parked some 100 feet from the accident, that she realized there was a burnt vehicle involved. She said it never occurred to her that it might belong to a family from the school 'because it was in the garage.'

Methodist school and church officials had no inkling either until a detective from the LAPD asked 'Are all of your families accounted for?' recalls Joy Detmer, the Methodist church office administrator. 'We told him 'yes,' as far as we knew.' Preschool director Jan Gentry said that when she left the school around 4 p.m. she was not aware there were people in the car. It was only after watching 'the 5 or 6 o'clock news' at home that she heard about the two fatalities, 'involving a man and a child.' She immediately rushed back to school and went through her parent list, trying to determine what family it could be.

Around 7 p.m. 'a detective came in and gave me the names,' Detmer said. 'I was devastated.' A little over an hour later Gentry and Reverend Nancy Wilson paid a visit to Colette.

'We prayed with her,' Wilson said.

Colette Taylor was home making dinner when three policeman came to her door around 6 p.m. They apparently asked if the family Acura had been stolen. She told them that as far as she knew it was in her husband's possession and that he was still out in it with their daughter.

According to the LAPD, there were no witnesses to the accident, although within minutes the tenant who occupies the apartment above the garage was on the scene.

'I heard a big crash and then tires spinning,' said Carla Testa, who has lived in the building for 11 years. 'Immediately I smelled smoke and ran to the garage but couldn't get the front door open. It was only when I ran around to the back that I saw a car had gone through the wall.'

Why the car went forward instead of reverse, and how it could have gained enough momentum to crash through a six-inch lathe and plaster wall is not known. What is known is that Jeff Taylor had suffered a seizure 'about a year ago,' his best friend Phil Pecsok told the Post.

The Methodist preschool reopened yesterday and is providing grief counseling. Preston arrived shortly after 9 a.m. with his mother, who briefly visited the accident scene, now bordered up, with a friend. A few minutes later she picked up some flowers and a note that had been left there and went into the church sanctuary.

'The best thing parents can do is to tell their children the truth,' advises Gentry. 'That there was an accident, that the father and daughter passed away and that we believe they are happy in heaven.'

Services for Jeff and Bayden Taylor are set for Friday at 2 p.m. at the Methodist church.