

Law change comes a year after fatal accident in Ocean City crosswalk

By ANN RICHARDSON
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OCEAN CITY – It's a legislative change of just one small word, but the impact is enormous.

Beginning April 1, New Jersey motorists are required to stop - and remain stopped - for pedestrians in crosswalks or face a steep fine.

"The key difference is the law went from yield to stop," said Lt. Steve Ang, a spokesman for the Ocean City Police Department. "Do the words technically mean the same thing? Sure. But yield is less definitive in the eyes of the law. Stop means stop, and remain stopped as long as the pedestrian is in the crosswalk. You are not supposed to proceed until they are out of the crosswalk."

The change in law was spurred by the tragic death of 21-year-old Casey Feldman. The college co-ed was on her way to work at Bob's Grill when she was hit by a car in the crosswalk at 14th Street and Central Avenue last summer.

The driver of the van that hit her, Anthony Lomonaco, pleaded guilty to operating a motor vehicle in a careless manner and was fined \$200 last month.

In a press conference to highlight the change in the law held on City Hall steps last week, Ang said Feldman's parents, Joel Feldman and Dianne Anderson, spoke about how the tragic loss of their daughter, who would have been a senior at Fordham University this year.

Feldman was a journalism major whose work was published in magazines and the college newspaper. She volunteered at women's shelters, soup kitchens and animal shelters.

"Her parents were very emotional, and extremely inspirational," he said. "She was a fabulous young lady headed for great things. It's a terrible loss."

Violators of the new law face a \$200 fine, up from \$100 for failure to yield. They could be required to do 15 days of community service and pay an insurance surcharge.

"Her parents have worked very hard to get this law changed," said Ang, adding that the couple has toured the state to promote the initiative with Pam Fischer, who heads the state's Division of Highway Traffic Safety.

Ang said vehicles must stop to allow pedestrians to cross whether the crosswalk is marked or not. It is illegal for one vehicle to pass another that has stopped.

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Pedestrians share responsibility for their own safety, he said.

"As we have said before, eye contact is very important," he said. "The law can be the law. The pedestrian has the right of way, but that doesn't mean that a driver is not going to be distracted, that for whatever reason the driver doesn't see the pedestrian. A pedestrian must make sure that the driver sees them, and is able to stop, before they start to cross."

"If the driver doesn't see you, you might have the right of way, but if you get hit by a 4,000-pound car it's not going to matter. You have won the battle but lost the war," he added.

Motorists do not have to stop at an intersection with a traffic light if they have the green light. And said pedestrians do not have carte blanche to cross anywhere.

"You see this more and more," he said. "They are aware of the law, but aren't following it themselves. It is sometimes assumed that drivers will just stop, that you can walk out from anywhere and have the right of way, that's not true. You have to walk corner to corner, in the crosswalk, not an angle."

There are only two mid-block crosswalks in Ocean City. One is downtown on Asbury between Eighth and Ninth streets and the other is in front of Ocean City High School. Other than that, Ang said, pedestrians can't cross mid-block.

Ang said police would be actively enforcing the law. Expect decoys on the road this summer, he said.

"We're going to do what we did last summer, put decoys out to test people

about the law," he said. "We're going to see that drivers are paying attention. Right now it's an education process. By this summer it will be an enforcement process."

Ang said the Feldman family was turning an "unimaginable tragedy" into something positive in Casey's memory.

"We'll never know how many lives will be saved," he said. "The bottom line is that pedestrian deaths are up. At the shore, the number of deaths can depend on the weather and the crowds, if you have more people on the island chances are you have more accidents."

To honor Feldman's memory and highlight the new pedestrian law, Ang said police purchased pink Christmas tree-style lights that will be placed on various trees throughout the island. A likely spot is along 14th Street near Bob's Grill, and possibly along Ninth Street.

After Feldman's death, her friends created pink bracelets with the inscription "A star in life, a star in heaven." The bracelets have become a symbol to remind people not to be a distracted driver.

"The pink lights are a reminder," said Ang. "Ocean City is one of many towns throughout New Jersey that will be doing this."

The family created a website, www.caseyfeldman.com where visitors can contribute to a memorial, donate to charities in Casey's name or learn more about pedestrian safety.

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