

Casey Feldman added to national web campaign

U.S. DOT video warns of distracted driving dangers

By MARJORIE PRESTON
Staff Writer

A familiar face has just been added to the U.S. Department of Transportation's web campaign against distracted driving: Casey Feldman.

The fair-haired 21-year-old died in July 2009, after being struck by a van in Ocean City. Since then, Casey's image has appeared on a number of road signs across South Jersey, warning of the perils of distracted driving.

Distractions include many activities: cell phone use, eating in the car, changing a CD, twirling a radio dial—anything that can take a driver's hands off the driving wheel and attention off the road.

The accident that killed Casey took place in broad daylight, on Asbury Avenue, a street with a posted speed limit of 25 mph. She was crossing the street at an intersection with four-way stop signs, on the way to her summer job as a waitress.

Police said the driver, 58-year-old Anthony LoMacono of Cape May Court House, was simply putting a cup of iced tea in a cupholder when his vehicle hit Casey. She was conscious and asked for her mother at the scene, and died five hours later at AtlantiCare Regional Medical Center.

"She was just a dynamo—smart and energetic, kind and compassionate," says Dianne Anderson Feldman, who did not make it to her daughter's bedside in time to say goodbye. "It's tough. If I'd been notified a little sooner, I could have comforted her. That's one of the hardest things."

The new website video is unique in that it was created by Casey's father, Joel Feldman, and submitted to the federal DOT.

"They had never accepted a video from the public, they filmed them themselves," says Feldman, a Philadelphia attorney, who filmed the video in January. "I kind of went out on a limb, filming Casey's friends and my wife, but I had this feeling from the beginning that it would be compelling enough for them to add it. I was very, very happy when they did."

Since the tragedy, the Feldmans and

Casey's friends have become activists against distracted driving, which killed almost 6,000 people nationwide in 2009 (the last year for which statistics are available) and injured half a million more. Also in memory of their daughter, Joel and Dianne Feldman started the Casey Feldman Memorial Foundation, which provides scholarships to communications students at Fordham University in New York, Casey's alma mater.

In the moving video, Casey's friend Katie Feeney describes the young journalist as "so funny and so vibrant and so beautiful in every way."

Website images bear that out. Pictures show Casey laughing with friends, nuzzling a dog, mugging for the camera, radiant in a formal red dress. In her too-brief life, she worked for a number of newspapers and television news programs, and won many awards for her journalism. While living in New York City, she volunteered at a soup kitchen, a homeless shelter and an animal refuge.

"It was such a senseless death," says Brooke Burdge of New York, Casey's friend, who also appears in the video. "She had an amazing life of ahead of her. She was looking forward to her senior year at Fordham, and graduating and being a journalist in New York. For her to lose all that, and for us to lose Casey, because someone made the decision to look away from the road while driving, is completely senseless."

Burdge says Casey was "very inquisitive and spontaneous and fun and light-hearted." And her absence continues to be a painful void in the lives of all who loved her.

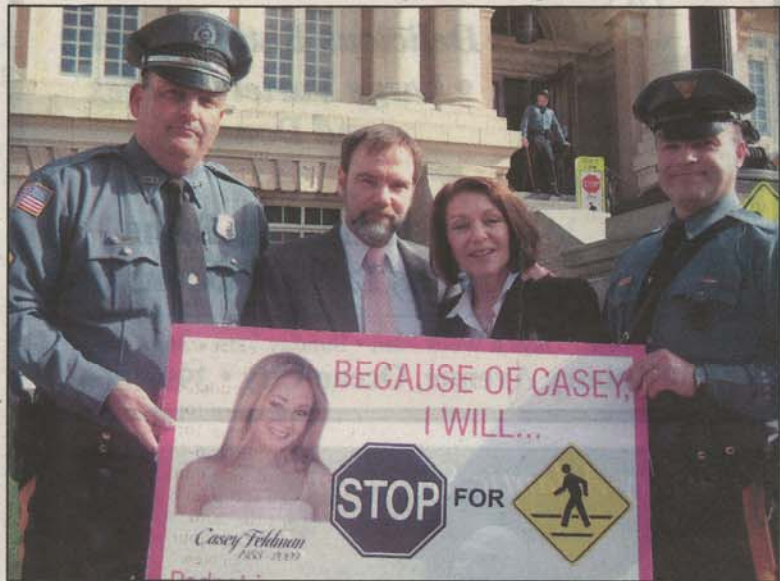
"Doing the video helped give us meaning out of something so tragic and negative," Burdge says, adding that her driving habits have been altered forever. "I think I take it personally now. We all take it more personally. It's hard to explain to someone who doesn't have this sensitivity."

Feldman credits DOT Secretary Ray LaHood for being "an incredible advocate for raising awareness about distracted driving. He set up the website, to show these are real people, not just a statistic."

But the statistics alone are disturbing. Distracted driving now ranks as the second leading cause of driving fatalities after drunk driving. Cell phone use while driving, though illegal in many states including New Jersey, is commonplace. Yet Feldman is optimistic that his daughter's story can help persuade people to keep their eyes on the road.



Casey Feldman died after a July 2009 distracted-driving accident in downtown Ocean City.



Casey's parents, Diane Anderson Feldman and Joel Feldman, honor their daughter by campaigning against distracted driving.

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— Brooke Burdge

"I've received hundreds of emails, and they're very encouraging," he says. "People are turning their cell phones off and putting them in the back seat; they're not eating or putting on makeup or changing CDs. They are making a conscious decision for your safety and everyone else's."

"We've talked to so many parents," adds Dianne Feldman, "who say they've shared it with their families and found it to be compelling. We just ask people to think about how a few moments of distraction could

mean the loss of a parent, a child, a friend, a family member. It could mean the loss of a beautiful life like Casey's. We will grieve for the rest of our lives."

Casey's friend and college roommate, Janine Repka, may sum it up when she says in the video, "Driving is not a secondary task. When you're behind the wheel, it is the only task you should be doing."

For more information, visit www.caseyfeldmanfoundation.org, www.caseyfeldman.com, or www.distractions.gov.

MORE FACTS ABOUT DISTRACTED DRIVING

- The National Highway Transportation Safety Administration reports that 20 percent of injury crashes in 2009 involved reports of distracted driving.
- Of those killed in distracted-driving crashes, 995 involved reports of a cell phone as a distraction.
- The age group with the greatest proportion of distracted drivers is the under-20 age group. Sixteen percent of all drivers younger than 20 involved in fatal crashes

were reported to have been distracted while driving.

- According to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, drivers who use hand-held devices are four times as likely to get into crashes serious enough to injure themselves.

- The University of Utah reports that using a cell phone use while driving, whether it's hand-held or hands-free, delays a driver's reactions as much as having a blood alcohol concentration at the legal limit of .08 percent.

"People are making a conscious decision for your safety and everyone else's."

— Joel Feldman