

Families of GM crash victims speak out

Shannon Jones
9 April 2014

“People were losing their lives over a part that costs \$5”

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to the families of several victims who died in crashes linked to the ignition defect on GM vehicles. A large proportion of those killed in crashes involving these small, low-cost vehicles were in their teens or early twenties.

Ken Rimer of Hammond, Wisconsin was the stepfather of accident victim Natasha Weigel, age 18. Weigel and her friend Amy Rademaker, age 15, were killed in October 2006 when the 2005 Cobalt in which they were riding left the road and struck a tree. The deaths have been linked to the airbags failure to deploy due to the defective ignition switch installed on the Cobalt and other recently recalled GM models. Rademaker died at the scene while Weigel died after being in a coma for 11 days. The driver survived.

“It rocked my wife’s world,” said Rimer. “Natasha was her only child. She has no wedding day to look forward to. No grandchildren. There’s nobody left.”

He explained how the family learned of the tie between the fatal crash and the defective ignition. “I worked closely with the accident investigators. The key was in the ‘accessory mode.’ We had the service bulletin from GM about the key ring. We suspected it was mechanical, but we had little to go on. They were, after all, three young girls in the car. We knew the car engine shut off five seconds before the crash, but we didn’t know why.

“As soon as the car left the roadway, it vaulted over the adjoining driveway. To stop the car in that situation was almost an impossibility.

“I was very frustrated by (General Motors CEO) Barra’s testimony. She was well trained by her attorneys. She avoided as many questions as she could. She had been there 30 years and was in a high position

of command. She should have known.

“They have been talking about charging GM executives with criminal negligence. They knew the switch was faulty and used it anyway. There has to be some impact on GM because of the fact they knew about it and hid it. I don’t think they should be allowed to hide behind the bankruptcy shield.”

Rimer also criticized the government regulators of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). “I was surprised to find out they can only go by what they are told by the auto companies. I can’t see an auto manufacturer being forthright on every issue. I think they dropped the ball big time. There were many red flags, but they weren’t able to make that link.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* also spoke with Pam Harding of Baroda, Michigan about the loss of her son Joseph, age 19, in an accident involving a 2006 Cobalt that smashed into a tree in September 2008. Both Joseph and his friend Zachary Schoenbach were killed after the car’s airbags failed to deploy. Ms. Harding was made aware only recently that her son’s death was being investigated as possibly connected to the defective ignition switch on the Cobalt.

“For almost 6 years I wanted to know what happened that night,” she said. “When I was told it could have been the car, I was dumbfounded. I am still in shock.

“My son was two months from his 20th birthday and he had his whole life before him. Joey was my whole life. Losing him was more than I can bear. I was supposed to die before my child, but that didn’t happen.

“I still have my son’s ashes in my home.

“I just got the police report from the accident in the mail today. It says not long after the accident GM hired a private investigator to look at the car. They knew all along, otherwise why send a private investigator?

“In the police report, there is something about the little black box. It was blank at the time of the accident,

which means the car could not have been running. For almost six years I told myself I wanted to know; well now I know.

“This has turned my whole world upside down. What if the airbag had deployed? Would it have saved his life? Would the other boy be alive? I don’t know. My husband to this day can’t talk about it. He lost his first child to spinal meningitis. Losing Joey just devastated him. He doesn’t have a child now.”

Harding gave her reaction to the appearance of Mary Barra before Congress. “I started watching her, but she really didn’t tell anything. All she was saying is ‘I don’t know, I am waiting for an investigation.’ How can you become a vice president and then the CEO and not know something? Was it worth all those people dying?

“I saw a status report and there were 13 deaths that are known and 40 more that could have been related.

“Will we ever get to know the truth? We don’t know a lot of things. If GM knew for 10 years, why didn’t they fix the cars and warn customers? Instead, they told people to only put one key on the key ring. How many people only have only one key on their key ring? People were losing their lives over a part that cost \$5?”

“They don’t want to accept the fact that they are wrong. In the end, they will pay off everybody and it will fly under the table, like nothing had happened. They have big-time lawyers.

“I read where they are not liable for anything that happened before bankruptcy (in 2009). They knew but they didn’t want the people to know.”



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