

Relatives of GM crash victims hold Detroit protest

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Family members of two young women killed in accidents involving General Motors cars with defective ignition switches protested outside General Motors headquarters in Detroit Monday in advance of the automaker's annual stockholders meeting.

Ken Rimer, stepfather of Natasha Weigel, and Laura Christian, mother of Amber Marie Rose, spoke to members of the press about the tragedies that took the lives of their children. GM has acknowledged 13 deaths from the defect, which can cause the engine on the Chevrolet Cobalt and other lower cost models to suddenly turn off, disabling power steering, power brakes and airbags. The actual number of fatalities is likely in the hundreds.

Natasha Weigel, 18, and her friend Amy Rademaker, 15, died when their Cobalt lost power and slammed into trees in rural Wisconsin in 2006. Investigators reported that the car's ignition switch was in the accessory position and the airbags did not deploy. Natasha's death is not included in GM's "official" tally because she was a back seat passenger.

Amber Marie Rose, 16, died when her Cobalt hit a tree in Dentsville, Maryland in 2005. Despite it being a front impact collision, the airbag did not deploy. As a result Amber hit the steering column with such force that she broke it.

The protest took place in the wake of the release of a report commissioned by GM into its handling of the deadly defects. It documented that GM knew about the defective part as early as 2001, but took no action to fix it or warn customers, even as complaints and reports of fatal accidents mounted. However, the report absolved top officials of any involvement in the cover-up, pointing its finger instead at a number of engineers and attorneys.

At an impromptu press conference outside GM

headquarters Rimer and Christian took questions from reporters about the recall scandal.

Asked about his reaction to the report Rimer said, "I am frustrated. Everything was right in front of them. They classified the ignition switch, which could cause the car to stall, as an 'inconvenience.' An inconvenience killed these two girls?" he asked, pointing to pictures of Natasha and Amber. "That was a safety issue."

Ken Rimer continued, "Everything was there. The frustrating part was that the high paid engineers, the legal people, everybody, they just couldn't put two and two together. The Wisconsin State patrol did an awesome investigative report. They supplied that information to GM in 2007. The GM officials did not look at it until 2013. That told them right there the ignition switch caused the failure of the airbags. Nobody opened it up to read it.

"Even Ray Degiorgio, the engineer who designed the switch, classified it as the 'ignition switch from hell.' We know that. He knew it in 2002. Why did it even get into a car?"

This reporter asked Rimer if he saw a conscious cover-up on the part of General Motors.

"They are denying it. But there was information that was there. The engineer says he doesn't remember making the change in the switch. Maybe he was really busy that day. Maybe he was. But he denied it to so many different people there.

"Somebody had to have known a little bit more than that. In an interview last week or so on another news channel they interviewed another engineer from General Motors and he made the comment that a person cannot make a change without involving a whole number of other people in the organization—the legal people, the marketing people—it is more than just a slip

of the pen to make things happen. So more people knew about this than what is listed in the report.”

Laura Christian interjected, “I think they knew. I have followed the report, and I am only a quarter of the way through, but Ray Degiorgio seems to have forgotten everything except his name. That seems rather hard for me to fathom. And the engineers didn’t know how their own cars were built. Really? That is too incredible.”

Rimer added, “So they weren’t aware that taking the ignition switch out of the accessory position would make the airbags not deploy? That is like engineering 101. OK, how does this work?”

“[Natasha] was killed in the accident because of the ignition switch failure. Obviously they are aware of it. They are responsible for more deaths than they recognize.”

After the press conference this reporter spoke with Laura Christian.

WSWS: Can you tell us about your daughter?

Laura: She was 16. I put her up for adoption and I was reunited with her exactly one year before she died. She was absolutely incredible. She was intelligent; she was beautiful. She had such a good heart. She also was extremely tenacious. What she wanted to achieve she would. The day she died she was actually going to be promoted in my office.

The accident happened July 29, 2005. The car went into the accessory position and she lost power steering, power brakes and most importantly the airbags did not deploy. The EMT’s told us afterwards that she would have been alive if the airbags had deployed.

WSWS: Do you believe the claim no one in the top GM administration knew of the defect?

Laura: I am very skeptical of it. They are settling so many lawsuits. They are buying back cars. They are getting consumer complaints. They are getting fleet vehicle complaints. Many of their engineers knew of it. How could that possibly not go to the top? I think we will uncover that.

WSWS: Do you think there was a conscious cover up?

Laura: Yes

WSWS: What was the motivation?

Laura: Money. This was a loss leader. The Delta platform was not making GM any money. So there was not an ‘acceptable business case’ to change the parts

out. It was cheaper to settle for a few deaths than to change the parts and do a major recall.

About 60 percent of the accident victims were young people. Especially with the Cobalt. We never settled with GM because we are not interested in money. I am only suing them now because it seems to be the only thing they listen to.

WSWS: What about the prosecution of GM officials?

Laura: That’s what we want. There is a petition to hold GM criminally liable. If you or I went out and killed somebody we would be held to the maximum penalty. GM should be held to those same standard.



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