

NEWS **Local News Columnist**
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Steve Blow writes about local news for The Dallas Morning News.

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Steve Blow: Colliding with reality

'No parent should have to go through what we've been through'

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Like oppressive heat or a pungent smell, sorrow is so strong in the Bolka home that it seems to press against your skin.

"We are shattered," Johna Bolka said simply. And the grief written across her face said it more plainly than the words.

It has been two weeks and a day since the Bolkas' 17-year-old daughter, Katie, was struck by another car as she drove to her final exams at Ursuline Academy.

"A senseless automobile accident" – that's the phrase that was used in Katie's obituary and again on Tuesday by her father, Rick.

Katie was hit by a 90-year-old driver who, witnesses said, drove through a red light at the intersection of Preston Road and Royal Lane.

Perhaps to bring some sense to the senseless accident, Rick and Johna have vowed to change the laws of our state. They say elderly drivers must begin demonstrating their ability to drive safely to renew a license.

That's a big undertaking. And grief nearly immobilizes them at this point. Johna said her greatest task now is "just breathing."

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BARBARA DAVIDSON/DMN
Lake Highlands dad Rick Bolka, daughter Nina and wife Johna are mourning the death of 17-year-old Katie, who was killed in a car accident two weeks ago. Fourteen-year-old Nina is depicted hanging on the wall to the right; the

But as their strength returns, they promise a vigilant campaign that they say will not end until laws are changed. "We are tenacious people," Rick said. "And no parent should have to go through what we've been through." painting on the left shows Katie.

[Process of aging can bring risks to road](#)

Artistic, passionate Katie had studied all weekend for her final exams in algebra and chemistry. She left a little earlier than usual on that Tuesday morning. If not for that, her 14-year-old sister, Nina, would have been in the car with her.

"We prayed for a miracle," Rick said, "but maybe our miracle was that our other daughter wasn't in the car. We could have had two daughters in that trauma center."

Just a few exams stood between Katie and the vaunted status of being a senior. She had already made plans for summer – an economics class at Ursuline, a drawing class at SMU and beginning her search for a college.

Katie was driving her Honda Accord west on Royal Lane, headed to school from her Lake Highlands home. It was 7:45 a.m.

Witnesses said 90-year-old Elizabeth Grimes' Mercury Grand Marquis drove into the intersection, clipped one car and then plowed into Katie's door.

Francoise Webb was stopped at the light on Preston Road, three cars back. She didn't see the collision, but she said the impact sounded like an explosion.

Instinctively, she jumped from her car and ran to Katie's car. She immediately recognized the Ursuline uniform. Her daughter had attended there. Soon she was on the phone with Johna.

For the Bolkas, it brings comfort to know that Katie was immediately comforted by Mrs. Webb.

Ms. Grimes and those in the other car were not critically injured.

Katie suffered a traumatic injury to her brain. She died 5 ½ days later without regaining consciousness.

Chicago lawyer David Rosenfield studied driver's license renewal laws across the country and published his findings in 2004 in *The Elder Law Journal*. What he found was a hodgepodge of approaches but almost no actual testing to determine continued fitness to drive at advanced ages.

Perhaps even worse, he found no political will to change that.

"Older people vote, and no one is gung-ho to take that group on," Mr. Rosenfield said.

Statistics are often used to show that elderly drivers pose no special danger. But Mr. Rosenfield said those studies don't take into account the fewer miles the elderly drive.

Looking at accidents per miles driven, elderly drivers have more accidents and more fatal accidents than any other age group, he said.

Statistics seem so paltry in the face of the Bolkas' suffocating sorrow. But they do not lie.

The 90-year-old driver who ended Katie Bolka's life was six blocks from home.

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