



# Ruined lives

Victims were killed or maimed  
but cops were spared prison

BY SALLY KESTIN AND JOHN MAINES | Staff writers

As the 21-year-old driver pulled toward the intersection, the approaching headlights glinted only faintly in the distance.

“They were very far away,” Heather Meyer said later. “I didn’t even know what kind of car it was.”

In that oncoming car: Broward Sheriff’s Deputy Frank McCurrie, racing to aid a fellow officer with a traffic stop. McCurrie hit the gas, accelerating from 24 to 87 mph in 24 seconds, and reached Meyer just as she turned left off Dixie Highway in Oakland Park.

The deputy’s Ford Crown Victoria T-boned the Honda Civic with such force it sliced the car in two behind the front seats. The front spun clockwise for more than 30 feet while the mangled rear hurtled into a swale 70 feet away.

“I couldn’t see very well because I was bleeding from my eye,” Meyer told investigators.

“But I remember I was the only person in the car afterwards.”

Meyer’s 14-year-old stepsister, Cara Catlin, had been in the back seat. They found her body 37 feet from the point of impact.

And that traffic stop McCurrie was speeding to?

A burned-out tag light, sheriff’s records show.

The rookie deputy was fired. Now 23, he awaits trial on charges of vehicular homicide and reckless driving.

Catlin, a Northeast High School freshman known for her ever-present smile, was the young-

## WHAT WE FOUND

The newspaper’s analysis of the state’s worst high-speed cop crashes revealed:

- Many officers were not racing to a crime scene — they were responding to routine calls, speeding for no valid reason or just rushing to work.
- Speeding cops are often spared severe punishment in the criminal justice system. Cops found at fault for fatal wrecks caused by speeding have faced consequences ranging from no criminal charges to a maximum of 60 days in jail.
- Inside many police agencies, speeding isn’t taken seriously until it results in tragedy. Even then, some cops are disciplined but stay on the job — and the road.
- The dead include seven police officers who crashed at speeds up to 61 mph over the legal limit.

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est of at least 21 Floridians killed or maimed by speeding cops since 2004, the Sun Sentinel found.

## BRAIN-DAMAGED FOR LIFE

The police officer who plowed into a college student at 104 mph had a troubled on-the-job



Cara Catlin, 14, was in the back seat of this car, hit by a Broward sheriff's deputy going 87 mph..  
**Sun Sentinel/File photo**

driving history.

Erskin Bell Jr., 20, had been living in Fort Lauderdale and studying to be an air traffic controller at Miami-Dade College when he went home to Ocoee, near Orlando, for Thanksgiving in 2008.

He and a friend were stopped at a red right when Altamonte Springs Police Officer Mark Maupin smashed into them from behind.

Maupin was traveling 104 mph at the moment of impact and even faster just before, when he lost control of his Chevrolet police cruiser in a curve, records show. He was on-duty, but wasn't in pursuit or even responding to a call, dispatch records and radio communications indicate.

"He was going 130 in his police car just to see how fast it would go," said Bell's attorney, Nathan Carter of Orlando.

The crash crushed the Honda Civic. The impact was so great, Carter said, Bell's "brain stem literally separated from the base of his skull."

Bell was left severely brain-damaged. Now 23 and bedridden, he lives at home under 24-hour care.

"He is not responsive at all," said his father,



Renee Shamblyn, 16, Rachael Willis, 17, and Laura Llauger, 15, console each other at a memorial service for Cara Catlin, 14, who was killed in January 2010.  
**Sun Sentinel/file photo**

Erskin Bell Sr. "There's nothing he can do for himself other than just opening his eyes."

The older Bell works for a legal services company in South Florida during the week and said he regularly sees speeding police. "It makes me angry," he said, "when I see a cop fly by me doing 90 to 95."

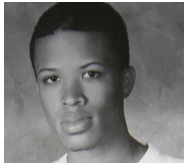


*“We’ve never been completely happy since that happened.  
We all try. It was just so tragic, so traumatic.”*

*Ginger Murphy, whose father was killed by an officer going 98 mph in a 40 mph zone with no lights or siren*

Maupin, now 52, could not be reached for comment.

His superiors had plenty of warning about his driving long before he crashed into Bell.



Bell

Maupin had been involved in previous on-the-job accidents and found at fault in at least one. He also had been reprimanded for speeding at night with no headlights as a joke on a fellow officer.



Maupin

Maupin suffered a head injury in the crash with Bell. His bosses warned him to be careful while their investigation into the crash proceeded.

Yet three days after Maupin returned to work, he drove more than 100 mph to catch a speeder outside his patrol area. His bosses suspended him, internal affairs records show.

Then came the results of the internal investigation into the Bell crash: Maupin’s driving that night was “absolutely unreasonable, unsafe and void of any due caution.” Maupin resigned.

FHP cited him for failure to use due care and not wearing his seat belt. His punishment: loss of his driver’s license for 90 days.

## A DEATH, BUT NO TRIAL

The cop who hit and killed a 65-year-old woman out for a morning walk faced no criminal charges. And his speeding ticket? Dismissed.

Brevard Sheriff’s Deputy Vincent Marino-Vitani was speeding to work at 65 mph — 25 mph over the limit — when he hit Henrietta Strong, of Cocoa, in September 2010, according to the Florida Highway Patrol.

The FHP ticketed Marino-Vitani for speeding, but never presented evidence in court that he was driving the car that hit Strong, said the deputy’s lawyer, Brian Onek of Melbourne.

“They ... never got his supervisors to verify that

he was assigned to the car,” said Strong’s daughter, Amie Walker of Cocoa.



Strong

Records from Marino-Vitani’s own department showed the deputy radioed dispatchers that he’d been in an accident and requested paramedics.

Brevard Judge Kelly McKibben ruled that “other than the fact that the defendant was on scene, there was no evidence to prove that he was the driver of the vehicle.”

Marino-Vitani almost escaped consequences at work as well. An internal investigation initially concluded the crash was unavoidable, but a supervisor spoke up with concerns about the deputy’s speeding that morning. The Sheriff’s Office suspended Marino-Vitani for a week and revoked his take-home car for six months.

The deputy, 46, did not respond to a message seeking comment.

Strong’s family circulated a petition and wrote the judge and FHP, but never could hold Marino-Vitani accountable for her death. Had the driver not been a cop, “the outcome would have been totally different,” Strong’s daughter told the Sun Sentinel. “We don’t feel like any justice was done.”

## HABITUAL SPEEDER

Fort Lauderdale Police Officer Alexander Griss could have spent up to 15 years in prison for a June 2006 crash that killed a pedestrian. Instead, he got two months in a county lockup.

He may be the only Florida cop to serve time for a fatal high speed crash since 2004.

Griss’ shift had just ended; it was about 5:20 a.m. He barreled down Federal Highway at 92 mph, more than twice the speed limit, and slammed into Althea Tobias McKay as she crossed the street at Southeast 21st Street in Fort Lauderdale.

A police analysis of the computer in Griss’ car

found the officer had “routinely and egregiously violated the posted speed limits” before the crash, driving off duty as fast as 118 mph.



McKay

Griss was fired and charged with felony vehicular homicide.

The jury never learned of his past speeding, and convicted him of misdemeanor reckless driving.

The decision restricted Broward Circuit Judge Ilona Holmes to a maximum sentence of 90 days in jail.



Griss

She opted for 60.

“We gave you a car, a badge and a gun, and that was to protect and defend the citizens, not to continue with a penchant for a lead foot,” the judge told Griss at his July 2010 sentencing.

A tearful Griss apologized to McKay’s relatives.

“I can’t even begin to imagine what your family has gone through,” he said at his sentencing. “I know how hard it’s going to be on me for the rest of my life. This was a tragic accident. I know what I did was wrong.”

Griss, 28, did not respond to a phone message left with his father.

## ANOTHER CASE FALLS APART

A Greenacres police officer found to be speeding for no justifiable reason crashed his cruiser and killed another driver.



Chan

His criminal case? Dropped.

Officer Gary Chan was driving 83 to 92 mph on a road with a 45-mph speed limit when he hit Azinta Thompson, 69, as she attempted a left turn in February 2009, according to a Florida Highway Patrol report. Thompson, of Lake Worth, died from her injuries.

Chan was on his way to retrieve a wallet that had been stolen from a car. He had no reason to speed because he wasn’t responding to an emergency, an FHP investigation found.

“It appears, based on the damage and other



Crash investigators look over the wreckage of a Delray Beach police car that crashed along Southwest 18th Street west of the turnpike in February 2011. Authorities said Sgt. Adam Rosenthal was going 70 in a 45 mph zone because he was late for a morning briefing.

Mark Randall/Staff file photo

evidence, that the defendant was traveling at a speed in excess of 70 mph,” a prosecutor wrote in a court filing.

Chan was charged with felony vehicular homicide, but prosecutors later dropped the case. Two witnesses said he was going so fast he forced them off the road just before the crash, but two others reported that he wasn’t speeding.

“In light of the fact that the state cannot prove the speed...the state is unable to proceed on the criminal charges,” the prosecutor wrote.

Chan, 40, could not be reached for comment. Greenacres fired him in August 2009 for conducting a traffic stop outside the city in his personal vehicle.

## ONE-CAR CRASH

The lives lost include those of seven police officers.

Among them: Sgt. Adam Rosenthal, beloved by fellow officers at the Delray Beach Police Department, where he was known as the “gentle giant” for his tall stature and heart of gold.

Rosenthal, 39, died Feb. 17, 2011 when he

crashed his cruiser into a palm tree west of Boca Raton on his way to work. Late for a morning briefing, Rosenthal was going 70 mph in a 45-mph zone and may have been distracted, turning on the computer in his patrol car just before the 6:15 a.m. crash, an investigation concluded.

A witness told investigators he thought Rosenthal was in a chase because he was going “really, really fast.”

The 16-year veteran, who lived in Parkland, left a wife and four children.

## 98 MPH, NO LIGHTS OR SIREN

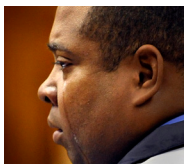
Ginger Murphy’s father was broadsided by a Jacksonville sheriff’s officer chasing a car with windows tinted too dark.



Ogden

“I look at the police in a different way now,” Murphy said.

Matthew Ogden, 86, was killed in January 2009 as he turned left to pick up lunch at a Kentucky Fried Chicken. Speeding with no lights or siren, Officer Marcus Kilpatrick hit speeds of 98 mph in a 40 mph zone on a road with an elementary school and a shopping plaza.



Kilpatrick

“He was going so fast, nobody would have had a chance,” Murphy said.

Asked by internal affairs investigators if he thought it appropriate to be driving so fast for a “minor traffic violation,” Kilpatrick responded, “In retrospect, no, not at all.”

Jacksonville Undersheriff Frank Mackesy said at a news conference that “running those speeds on a window tint violation, if you ask any police officer, they would tell you that that’s unreasonable. We all know better.”

Kilpatrick, now 32, was fired and charged with culpable negligence. He pleaded no contest and was sentenced to one year of probation and 100 hours of community service.

“It was just so senseless,” Murphy said. “It was such a shock when I got the call that it was a policeman that hit him.”

An avid hunter and family chef famous for his fudge at Christmas, Ogden was “so-called re-



Florida Highway Patrol troopers investigate after a speeding Jacksonville sheriff’s officer killed driver Matthew Ogden, 86, in 2009. Officer Marcus Kilpatrick was going 98 mph in a 40 mph zone with no lights or siren, police said. He was chasing a car for a window tint violation.

Rick Wilson/Florida Times-Union file photos

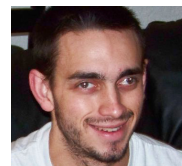
tired, but he was always doing something,” his daughter said.

A former construction business owner, Ogden volunteered for a community program building houses for the poor. He read to schoolchildren and marched with the Shriners in parades, proud of his service as a World War II veteran, Murphy said.

“We’ve never been completely happy since that happened. We all try,” she said. “It was just so tragic, so traumatic.”

## 101 MPH IN A NEIGHBORHOOD

Collier Sheriff’s Cpl. Jesse Todd was racing to join a pursuit of burglary suspects in March 2011 when he hit a car, killing 21-year-old Andrew Rakes of Naples.



Rakes

Crash investigators estimated his speed at 101 mph on a road with a speed limit of 45.

Prosecutors declined to file criminal charges. While the deputy’s speed “in hindsight appears excessive,” prosecutors wrote, that alone was not enough to justify a charge of vehicular homicide, and Rakes pulled in front of the deputy. Todd was issued a



traffic citation for operating an emergency vehicle unsafely, and pleaded not guilty.

Rakes had been on his way home from work-  
ing out, and was excited about a big date that  
weekend — his first.

His family later learned that in 2007, Todd  
been involved in another fatal crash while  
speeding. Todd was driving 25 mph over the  
speed limit with no lights or siren on his way  
to a robbery near Naples. The call was down-  
graded about 30 seconds before he hit and  
killed Felix Beltran.

The sheriff blamed the crash on Beltran, who  
was drunk and turned his car into the deputy's  
path.

Todd received a written reprimand and 12  
months of probation — not for the crash but  
for failing to inform a supervisor he was re-  
sponding to the robbery call.

“For this guy to kill one person is just outra-  
geous,” said Rakes’ stepfather, Thomas Bell of  
Naples.

Neither Todd, 30, nor his attorney could  
be reached for comment. A sheriff’s spokes-  
woman said the deputy has been reassigned to  
monitor inmate visits.

### THREE-PART SERIES

The Sun Sentinel investigated a year’s worth of SunPass data for Broward, Palm Beach and  
Miami-Dade counties and found police speeding is rampant and rarely punished.

**Sunday:** 90-plus mph is common, even when cops are off duty.

**Today:** High-speed cop crashes leave lives in ruin.

**Tuesday:** Police culture condones speeding.