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 youngest 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...
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,

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

His superiors had plenty of warning about his driving long before he crashed into 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 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 the driver of the vehicle.

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 barrelled 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 egregious-
ly violated the posted speed limits” before the

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

证据，表明被告超速70英里/小时，”检察官写道。

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.

 Chan

Chan

Griss

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

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.

“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.

“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 retired, 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.

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 working 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 downgraded 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 responding to the robbery call.

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

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

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**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.