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Parents call for school safety as community mourns crossing guard death

By Sharon K. Sobotta



Parents and students deposit flowers and toys at school memorial site. Photo Sharon K. Sobotta

schooler when the vehicle showed no sign of slowing down.

Like many who help children in the district, Boykin drives through the tunnel each morning to work at his intersection between the walking entrances at Lafayette Elementary School. Boykin says that although drivers have been doing better since the accident that took Dias's life, many were failing before that. "A lot of people get frustrated because they say there's too many kids, but the reality is that a lot of kids go to the middle and elementary schools," Boykin said. "We just need people to slow down."

Boykin says what keeps him doing the work is the same thing that worries him. "The kids," he said. "I have three kids of my own. I come from a large family. I do this job because of the kids. They show me love, respect and I enjoy being around them."

A growing memorial stands outside Stanley where Dias worked his last shift as a crossing guard. On Thursday, Sept. 9, administrators, in addition to nearly a dozen crossing guards and police officers patrolled the streets around Stanley. Many parents and students say that is exactly what they want to see around the schools everyday.

Olivia Bush is a sixth-grader at Stanley Middle School. Olivia watched the accident that involved a fellow middle schooler and Dias. "I had just gotten my bike when I saw a sixth grade kid I knew get pushed out of the way by the crossing guard," Olivia said. "The black SUV that hit him was going pretty fast - not super fast, but not slow. I don't think the driver saw any of them."

After school Olivia walked to Safeway to buy some flowers for Dias's memorial with her last four dollars, because she said she wanted to pay her respects. "It's really sad that he (Ashley Dias) had to lose his life, but he saved a kid's life and that's really cool of him to do."

"Every day when I drop off my kids, I think it's going to take someone dying for there to be safety around here," said Olivia's mother, Ashley Bush. "There are crosswalks without any cross guards, cars running stop lights. We've been nearly hit a few times just crossing at a stop light because people ran the lights."

While Bush appreciated the presence of officers on Thursday, she says she'd like to see police helping children cross every day. Bush lives on Moraga Road, where she says people drive too fast and there are no bike lanes and only very narrow sidewalks.

"Every day I feel like we put our lives at risk taking our kids to school," Bush said.

While it's clear that the traffic congestion of the growing city is here to stay, Bush hopes simple measures can be put into place. "All the crossing walks should have flashing lights that go off to signal to drivers that people are walking across the street," she said. "The lights on the pedestrian way near my house are out, so we just have to cross and hope for the best."

Bush, who like many, is saddened by Dias's death and grateful for his heroism has one hope: "Let's not let Ashley Dias's death be in vain."

Like many parents who have children at both Lafayette Elementary School and Stanley Middle School, Paulina Lares rushes to the elementary school at 2:42 p.m. to pick up her fourth-grade daughter Sofia and waits for her sixth-grade daughter Zoe to walk from the middle school at 3 p.m. "I used to feel very secure with my daughter walking the two blocks to get here, but it's apparently not safe anymore."

While extra security was in place around Stanley the day after the accident, Lares pointed out gaps around the elementary school. On Moraga road, there was merely one parent volunteer who stepped in when she saw the vacant crossing by Brooke Street. There's no guard at the busy School Street and Moraga Road intersection in front of the Town Hall Theatre or at the Moraga Boulevard and Moraga Road intersection where a pedestrian was struck and killed in 2017. "We really have to come together and take some action so that this doesn't happen again."

Ashley Dias showed up at Stanley Middle School long before the students on the morning of Sept. 8. Dias wasn't new to the job of being a crossing guard, but he was just two days into his assignment at that particular post in front of Stanley Middle School.

"When I saw him early in the morning, I told him he could go home and relax for an extra hour (because of the late start on Wednesdays)," his family friend and fellow crossing guard Frank Boykin said as he helped a cluster of parents cross the intersection of First and School streets on the day after the accident. "That was the last time I saw him."

Boykin says he referred Dias to the company they work(ed) for as crossing guards.

"He was a good kid, from a nice family and he lived right up the road," Boykin said, pointing toward Avalon Street. "I knew he'd be a good guy for the job."

At around 3 p.m. that Wednesday, Dias put himself between a large SUV and at least one Stanley Middle

Lares's 11-year-old daughter, Zoe, says she's having a hard time concentrating in school since it happened. "I read the memorial at school and it was really heartbreaking," Zoe said.

Community members are nurturing the growing memorial with offerings, messages, prayers and water for the flowers. The sentiment is best summarized in the message Zoe wrote. Gracias por todo. Eres un héroe en nuestra comunidad. Te queremos. "Thank you for everything," she wrote. "You are a hero in our community. We love you."

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