

Sonoma crosswalk accident heightens focus on elderly drivers

Tyler Meloan was injured Saturday when he and a friend reportedly were hit by a 92-year-old driver while in a Sonoma crosswalk.

JEFF KAN LEE / The Press Democrat

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Steve Meloan understands how difficult it can be to convince an aging parent to give up driving and, after a 92-year-old man reportedly struck Meloan's son in a crosswalk last weekend, knows the potential risks when that conversation fails.

Meloan's mother, also 92, turned over her keys only after driving had become a source of unsustainable stress.

"She'd map out how to get from point A to point B without ever turning left because she couldn't negotiate the real-time demands of oncoming traffic," said Meloan, a freelance

technology journalist who lives in Sonoma.

Meloan's 14-year-old-son, Tyler, and Sonoma Charter School classmate Toby Ragueneau, 13, were struck Saturday afternoon as the boys were walking in a crosswalk on Fifth Street West in front of Sassarini Elementary School.

Ragueneau suffered a skull fracture and was released Monday from a Napa hospital. Tyler Meloan was treated for a possible broken finger and abrasions.

Sonoma police cited Leo Arkelian for failing to yield to pedestrians and have asked the state Department of Motor Vehicles to review whether his driver's license should be suspended or revoked. The DMV has five days to take action so a decision is likely by Friday.

Sonoma Police Chief Bret Sackett said Tuesday that there was no evidence of a mechanical failure so the vehicle was not impounded. It was damaged, however, and towed to a local body shop at Arkelian's request.

Despite the citation, eyewitness accounts and the shattered windshield on his Toyota sedan, Arkelian has denied hitting anyone, saying he was attacked by a group of rowdy children after he stopped out of concern for their welfare.

Steve Meloan said he spoke briefly with Arkelian in the emergency room at Sonoma Valley Hospital, where Tyler Meloan was examined for his injuries. "He looked so forlorn and traumatized. It was very sad," Steve Meloan said.

He said his son also remains unnerved by the memory of seeing his friend getting struck by the car and knocked unconscious. Tyler told his parents he changed his mind and doesn't want to go out tonight for Halloween. It's also uncertain how his injuries will affect his piano playing and on the court as a member of his school basketball team.

Steve Meloan said the crash prompted discussions with other parents about whether there should be an age limit beyond which a person can no longer be licensed to drive.

"Such a firm limit would eliminate tragedies like what nearly happened with Toby and Tyler, would eliminate the age-old battles between adult children and their parents over when it's time

to stop driving, and would ultimately create societal infrastructures to allow the elderly to still get around once they were no longer driving," he said.

A 68-year-old Rohnert Park man who struck and killed a Sonoma State University professor on his bike in June, followed by the case of an 82-year-old Santa Rosa man who reportedly chased down a cyclist in his car and knocked him off his bike near Oakmont, renewed concerns about older drivers in Sonoma County.

Numerous pedestrians also have been hit by cars in crosswalks in recent years in Sonoma County. In Santa Rosa, 10 have been killed since January 2011, including two in the past two weeks.

The Fifth Street West crosswalk in Sonoma where the boys were walking on Saturday was upgraded in August last year, including the addition of lights and an audible warning.

California does not restrict drivers because of their age. However, drivers who are 70 or older must renew their licenses in person, must take a written test and must have their vision checked. Anyone can anonymously request that the DMV re-examine a driver, regardless of their age, to determine whether they are fit to drive. The form to fill out can be found at dmv.ca.gov/forms/ds/ds699.pdf.

There were 36,355 licensed drivers age 70 or older in Sonoma County at the start of 2012, according to the DMV. Of those, 1,678 were age 90 or older.

Statewide, there were 2,062,808 licensed drivers age 70 or older at the start of the year.

Simply broaching the subject of whether it's in a person's best interest to continue driving can cause anxiety, said Dean Brittingham, transportation coordinator at the Sebastopol Area Senior Center.

"There is that whole thing of, 'I'm old enough. Don't tell me what to do.' Or, 'He's my father. I can't say anything,'" Brittingham said.

But as Americans live longer, Brittingham said it's important to have those talks.

"Hopefully, it's before a crisis. Maybe you start seeing scraping on the car, or somebody says to you, 'I'm not comfortable driving on Mendocino Avenue anymore.' That can open up a conversation," she said.

Brittingham has helped organize a series of presentations at senior centers across Sonoma County titled "We Need to Talk: Family Conversations with Older Drivers," that are designed to help families understand the issues and prepare for conversations likely to prompt high emotion. The final two presentations are Nov. 7 at the Vintage House in Sonoma, 264 First St. East, and Nov. 14 at the Bennett Valley Senior Center in Santa Rosa, 704 Bennett Valley Road. To reserve a space, call Allegra Wilson at the Area Agency on Aging, 565-5950.