

Member profile: **David Sale**

David Sale's daughter Danielle was struck and killed by a public bus driver making an illegal turn. He turned anguish into activism, helping to make a driver-training curriculum that is used today by 450 transit companies.

David Sale has been a builder his whole life, a carpenter who went from small jobs to steering his own multi-unit housing development. But the biggest project of his career has been one he didn't choose: rebuilding his life after losing his 22-year-old daughter, Danielle, in a bus crash.

The crash, which happened April 24, 2010, took the life of not only Danielle, David's second child, but that of another young woman, Jenee' Hammel. And it left Danielle's then boyfriend, Erik Gitting, with horrific injuries. Two others were struck but got away with relatively light injuries. The crash went down as the "worst tragedy in TriMet's history" -- in the words of the company's own CEO.

The calamity unfolded just before midnight as driver Sandi Day was finishing her shift in Portland Old Town on a bustling Saturday night. A show had just let out at nearby Harvey's Comedy Club, and Danielle and Erik were part of the crowd leaving the venue.

As the five waited to cross NW Broadway on Glisan, the bus was on the opposite side of Glisan letting off a passenger at an unmarked stop. The problem was that the route turns left on Broadway so Day should have been stopped in the left lane. A left turn from the curb was not only hazardous but illegal. But she did it anyway, sweeping across four lanes of traffic and into the intersection, where she plowed into the five unwitting pedestrians. According to Day's court testimony, she wasn't aware she'd hit anyone until she saw Danielle's hair on her windshield.

David didn't learn about Danielle's death until the following morning. A preacher came to the door, and David could see the man's car was parked across his driveway with the door wide open. Something was up.

David was home with his whole family -- his wife and three other children. "I just lost it," David said. "I pretty much collapsed on the front lawn." As he recalls the memory, he stops and looks away for minute, regaining his voice. "It was a very rough day."

To prove his point, David cited an experiment conducted on a public bus in Seattle where a camera was set up directly behind the driver to capture what they can see. At one point during the filming, the driver is making a left turn in a busy area, and as he steers into the cross street, a little kid darts outside the crosswalk into the driver's field of vision. The bus screeches to a stop and doesn't hit the child -- or the child's family, who the driver hadn't even noticed. "It's like, 'Oh! Didn't see that,'" David says. "The only way he saw it, as you see in the video, was because the little kid got away from the rest of the group and ran in front of the bus."

In the spring of 2013, David was invited to Philadelphia by the drivers' union there (SEPTA) to help press home this very point to the city bus operator. The driver POV video of the unseen pedestrians made a big impact: The city changed the mirrors on more than 500 buses "just because I went to Philadelphia," David says.

Blood in the game

Publicity of the TriMet tragedy touched others in the transit industry. Among them were a Ohio-based company that delivers driver training programs, TAPTCO. They needed help with new course material, and David ended up putting together a half dozen "impact" videos to show bus drivers what can happen when complacency sets in. The training is used today by more than 450 public transit companies nationwide.

David continues to attend monthly TriMet Board meetings when he can to argue for better driver training, more strenuous pre-trip vehicle checks and better working conditions for drivers. Operator behavior is a major focus of his advocacy.

It was at a TriMet Board meeting that he met Darla Sturdy, whose son Aaron was struck and killed by a TriMet light-rail train in 2003. Sturdy and David are the only members of Families for Safe Streets who lost children in public transit crashes. Most members lost their loved ones in crashes involving private cars -- including a fair few connected to drunk driving.

But the unexpected loss of a child is a common bond, and David likes to help other parents in their grief. Doing so helps in his own recovery. "It's hard for people to step out of their comfort zone when something like that happens to your kid -- or any family member, for that matter," David says. "But with a kid it might be a lot harder."