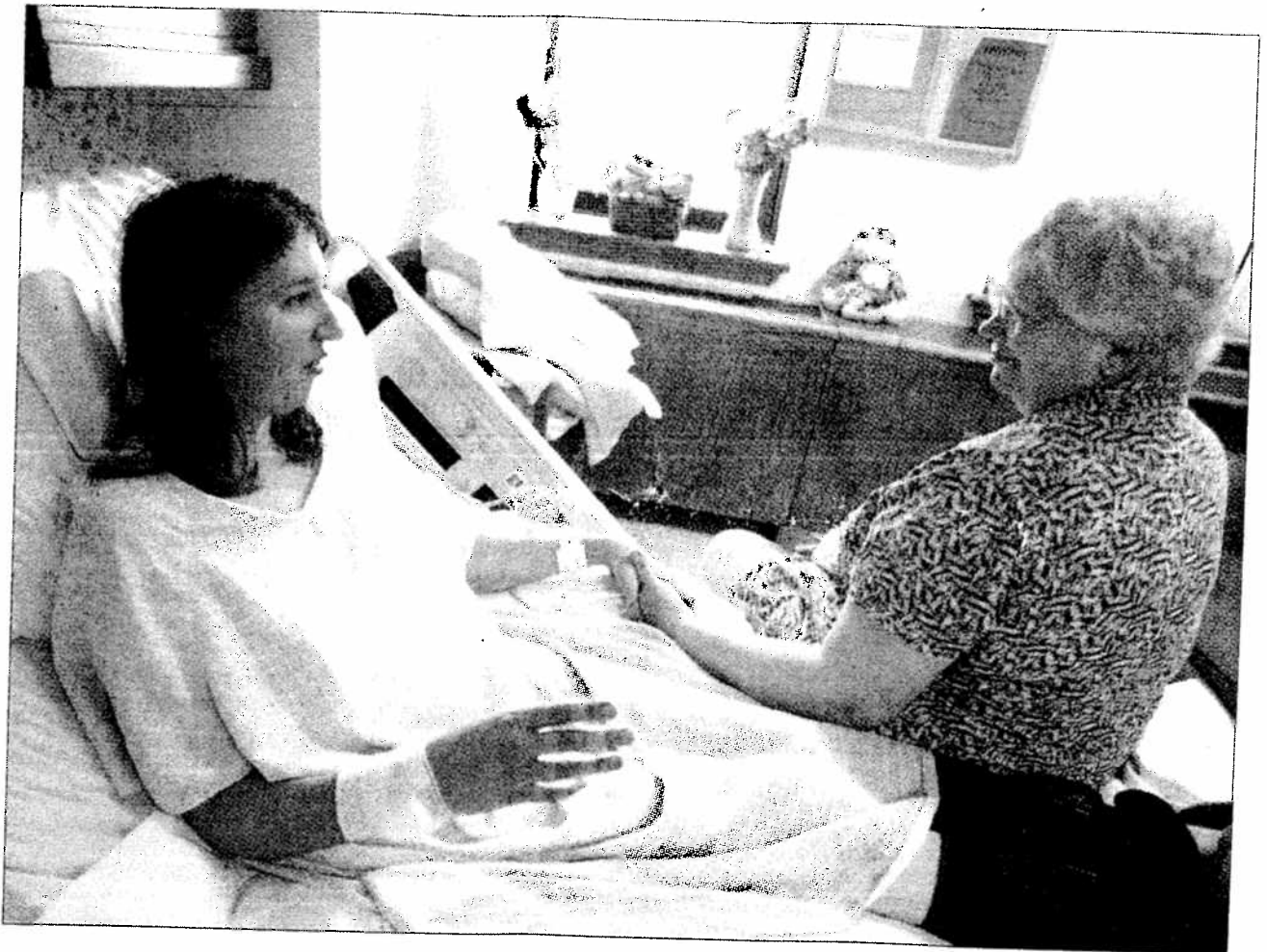


RECOVERY

Shattered dreams



STAR-TELEGRAM/JILL JOHNSON

Donna Ferolito, 33, left, talks to her mother, Melissa, at JPS Hospital. Ferolito is recovering from injuries from a June 13 accident.

A wreck on I-35W puts two families' lives on hold

By **MARTHA DELLER**
STAR-TELEGRAM STAFF WRITER

On a June day that started like any other, four motorists headed south on Interstate 35W, going about their lives.

Donna Ferolito was returning to Austin after a day of job interviews.

John and Mary Reutter were headed back to Burleson after visiting the dream home they were having built in far south Fort Worth.

Ismael Villarreal was driving an empty tanker truck.

About 3½ miles ahead of them was a collision involving a hay truck, according to Burleson police. Traffic was backing up.

"We could see the smoke from the hay truck fire," John Reutter recalled. "Mary was slowing down."

In an instant, four lives were dramatically changed.

More on WRECK on 11A



LAW OFFICES OF WILLIAM BERENSON

A tanker truck crashed into Ferolito's Toyota RAV4 with so much force that the SUV crumpled to less than half its size.

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Wreck: Lawsuit alleges trucker was negligent

CONTINUED FROM 1A

According to police, Villarreal failed to stop. The tanker slammed into the Reutters' 2002 Mustang before striking Ferolito's small SUV and setting off a multivehicle crash.

Now, Mary Reutter is in fair condition in Harris Methodist Fort Worth hospital's intensive care unit. Ferolito is in fair condition at John Peter Smith Hospital.

Last week, attorneys for the Reutters and Ferolito filed a civil lawsuit in Johnson County against Villarreal and United Petroleum Transports, which owns the tanker truck.

The suit alleges that Villarreal was negligent and seeks payment of the families' medical bills and other unspecified damages.

"So often you drive by these wrecks, you think about how long you're stuck in traffic," said Melissa Ferolito, Donna's mother, who visited with her daughter at the hospital Friday. "But you don't think about all the repercussions to the people involved in the accident."

Police report

The events of that day were pieced together by Burleson police Cpl. Sean Jolton, who interviewed Villarreal and other motorists.

About 3:10 p.m. on June 13, the empty tanker struck the Mustang, going over the back half of the car.

Then the truck crashed into Ferolito's Toyota RAV4 with so much force that the SUV crumpled to less than half its size. The SUV was mangled into a Jeep.

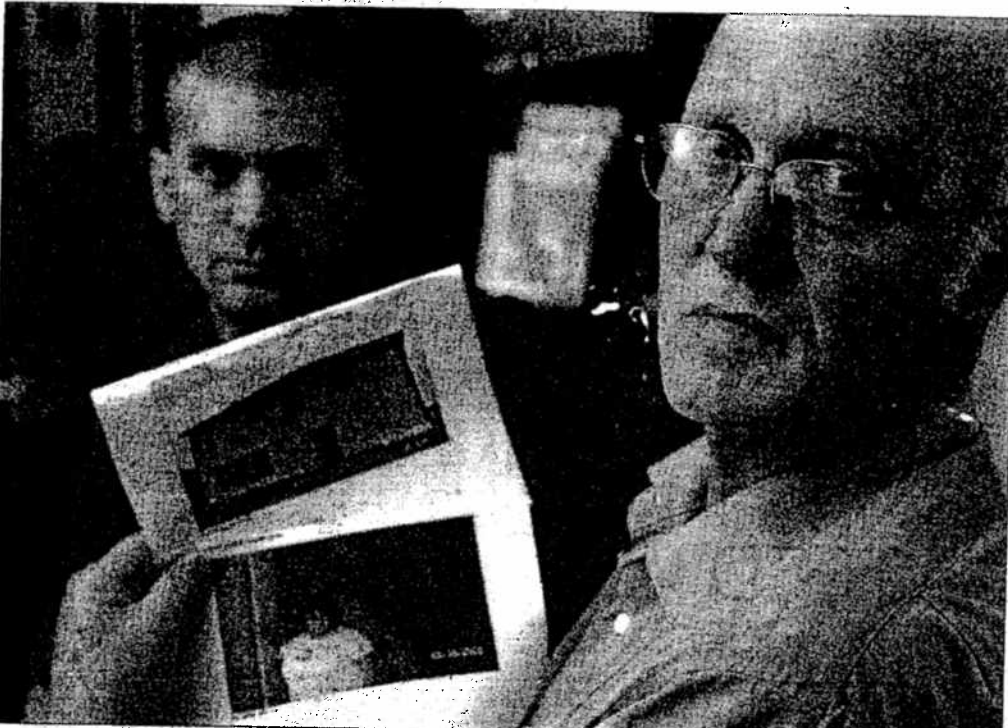
The Jeep struck a Ford pickup. The tanker, meanwhile, careened across the service road and finally came to a rest in a drainage ditch after hitting a tree.

The Jeep's two occupants were taken to the hospital and treated for minor injuries. Those in the Ford pickup were not seriously injured.

Emergency crews had to use power equipment to pry Ferolito and Mary Reutter from their mangled vehicles. They were airlifted to Fort Worth hospitals. John Reutter was taken by ambulance.

In recent interviews, John Reutter and Ferolito said they remember little about the wreck. Because of the severity of her injuries, Mary Reutter could not be interviewed.

"I remember someone saying something about my legs," said Ferolito, 33. "I remember yelling, 'I don't care you cut my legs off. Just get me out.'"



John Reutter holds photos of his new home and his wife, Mary, while waiting with his stepson Jerry Williams at Harris Methodist Fort Worth.



Emergency personnel free Donna Ferolito from her Toyota SUV after a tanker truck ran into the vehicle.



The truck also slammed into John and Mary Reutters' Mustang.

"At one point, I felt the car shake," she added. "I guess that was when they were cutting me out."

John Reutter said he must have told officers his family's phone number after the accident, but he doesn't remember.

His stepson, Jerry Williams, said he also must have dialed 911 because his cellphone was bloody where he held it to his torn left ear.

"He told us that Mom was crying out, 'Please help me, I can't breathe,'" Williams said. "He was asking people to help his wife."

Waiting for rehab

Ferolito was looking to move to Fort Worth from

Austin, hopeful for a job as a worker at a hospital laboratory. She liked the soccer leagues, too.

"In my head, I had these little personal goals in addition to finding a good job," she said. "I was just trying to change pace."

Ferolito said she spent a few days in intensive care, where doctors told her she had many injuries, including a ruptured spleen, lacerated liver, a fractured jaw and right wrist, and pelvic fractures.

She is most worried about the pelvic fractures that have kept her in bed for weeks and may have caused long-term nerve damage in her legs and feet, her doctors tell her.

Ferolito said she is frustrat-

ed with losing weeks or perhaps months of her life.

"I woke up in a nightmare," she said. "I can't get out of bed. I can't use my legs. They can't even tell me when I can move on to the next step, so I can't plan what to do with myself."

On Wednesday, Ferolito was more upbeat. She has been moved to a transitional unit at the hospital, where she was awaiting X-ray results to determine when she could begin rehabilitation.

Dream home sold

In 24 years, the Reutters raised four children together. They ran a private investigation firm. They took trips in their 32-foot long recreational vehicle.

In April, they began building a two-story, 3,300 square-foot brick house in the Crowley school district. They

planned to drive a school bus while starting a home inspection business, John Reutter said.

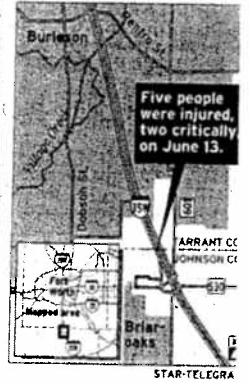
On the morning of June 13, the Reutters visited their new home. "The kids had bought us some knickknacks and [Mary] was trying to figure out where to put them," John Reutter said.

They were returning to the Burleson RV park where they were living temporarily when they were hit by the truck. Mary Reutter suffered a crushed left arm, a fractured neck and a punctured lung.

Today, John Reutter said, his wife is expected to be released from the ICU. When she is, she will be loaded into a medical transport plane and taken to Ann Arbor, Mich.

They're moving there so their children can help John Reutter care for her as she undergoes additional surgery

Crash scene



ies and rehabilitation. Their Fort Worth home, which they never lived in, was sold back to the builder.

"That house was her dream. Now that dream is shattered," he said. "Our hopes are that she will recuperate and we'll make our reventure plans over again."

But, he said, he doesn't know if that will ever happen.

Lawsuit filed

After the wreck, Villarreal, who lives in Abilene, was cited for following too closely. The lawsuit, filed by Fort Worth attorney William Berenson and Bellaire attorney Byron Boenig, alleges that Villarreal was reaching for a can of soda when the wreck occurred.

The trucking company declined to release additional information about him. Public records show he has been a truck driver for several years.

Karl Koen, a United Petroleum Transports attorney who is representing him, said neither the company nor Villarreal would comment.

But John Siebert, project manager of the Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Association Foundation, said professional truck drivers must be constantly on alert for other motorists.

"I can't excuse him letting his attention fade at a time when he knew there was a likelihood of having a quick stop ahead of him," he said.

Siebert does not know Villarreal, but he said he is certain he was affected by the accident. "It's always been a sad thing," he said. "They can be held to a higher standard, but they never will be able to overcome the physics that restrain the stopping of a truck."

"If [it] is true, the guilt he lives with will be substantial."

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