

## Police ID child, 2, killed in Walmart parking lot crash

(Joe Cavaretta, Sun Sentinel) **April 02, 2012** By Juan Ortega and Wayne K. Roustan, Sun Sentinel

MARGATE — A shopping trip turned tragic when a 2-year-old girl was struck and killed by an SUV outside a Walmart.

The Margate child, Sara Merant, and her mother, Kerlange Merant, 36, had finished their shopping at Walmart, 5555 W. Atlantic Blvd., and were walking back through the parking lot about 11:25 a.m. Monday, police said. Sheila Nusbaum of Margate was at the wheel of the Honda CRV that hit the little girl. Nusbaum was traveling south through the parking lot and stayed at the scene as police arrived, according to Sgt. Efrain Suarez.

Sara Merant was taken to Northwest Medical Center, where she was pronounced dead. Her mother collapsed and was taken to the hospital for treatment, officials said.

More than a dozen relatives and friends gathered at the Merant home in Margate to mourn Sara, the youngest of five children. Everyone was trying to tend to Kerlange Merant, who cried as she recalled the accident. Her husband, Penelson Merant, 45, was at her side.

"She made me happy," Kerlange Merant said. "She's not there anymore. She's gone forever."

"I loved her very much," said Penelson Merant, a landscaper who was at work when the crash happened. "She'd come to see me at the front door whenever I got back from work to say, 'Hi, Daddy.'"

Kerlange Merant said she and her daughter had gone to Walmart to buy bottled water. When they were done shopping, Kerlange Merant placed her items in her car's trunk, then lifted Sara out of the shopping cart and placed her in a child seat.

Kerlange Merant said she closed the door with the girl inside the car, not locking the door, while she stepped away for a moment to place the shopping cart away from the path of other vehicles.

Then she heard the commotion from the crash, she said. Kerlange Merant said she realized Sara had gotten out of her car to follow her.

"She followed me by the time I pushed the shopping cart," the mother said, saying her daughter knows how to remove herself from her child seat.

She said Sara normally stayed still in her car seat while they readied to drive away. "I don't know today what happened to her," Kerlange Merant said of her daughter following her.

How the girl ended up in the Honda's path is part of the police inquiry. No charges have been filed, pending the investigation's outcome.

The crash site was cordoned off with police tape. A blood stain and a small bottle of milk were in a traffic lane of the store parking lot. Firefighters were seen hosing down the area later in the day.

Kerlange Merant recalled how Sara liked to play with dolls and teddy bears, and how she called her dolls "baby" and kissed them. Sara liked watching Mickey Mouse on the Disney Channel and singing the "Hot Dog" theme song.

"She sings it with me," her mother said.

Generations of children have been told to look both ways before crossing the street, but too many still end up in harm's way, especially when they are behind vehicles, according to Kansas-based Kids and Cars.

The advocacy group has been campaigning to have automakers install rear-view cameras in every new vehicle so drivers can see children behind their cars when they are backing up.

Arden Rosenfeld, of west Boca Raton, successfully lobbied Congress for three years to have a law passed following the March 2005 death of her daughter Veronica, 2. The toddler died when a neighbor backed out of his driveway and struck her.

In Florida, 67 kids died in backup accidents from 1991 to 2011, according to Kids and Cars. Only California and Texas have more deaths in backup accidents.

"We've seen an increase in these types of accidents over the last 10 to 15 years as people are driving bigger trucks and SUVs," said Kids and Cars spokeswoman Amber Rollins.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates more than 220 people die and up to 17,000 are injured every year in the U.S. because of accidents involving a driver who didn't see someone behind their vehicle. Nearly half the fatalities are children, the NHTSA said.

Rollins said two children are killed each week in back-over accidents. Most of the incidents happen in driveways or in parking lots.

"Nothing is worse than the death of a child," Rollins said. "In 70 percent of the cases, it's a parent or close relative that is driving."

In February 2008, President George W. Bush signed a law requiring a "rear visibility standard" for all new cars and trucks so drivers can see behind their vehicles while backing.

But the U.S. Department of Transportation has delayed implementing the standard several times while deciding what automakers should do to meet the mandate, which would likely take effect in 2014. The new deadline to establish the standard is set for the end of 2012.

"What we think will happen is that all vehicles will be required to come standard with backup cameras," Rollins said.

Backup cameras are standard in about 45 percent of 2012 cars sold in the U.S.

Sheila Nusbaum could not be reached for comment despite phone calls to listed numbers.

Authorities urge anyone who saw the accident to call police investigator Steven Randazzo at 954-972-1232.

Staff Researcher Barbara Hijek and writer Mike Turnbull contributed to this report.

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