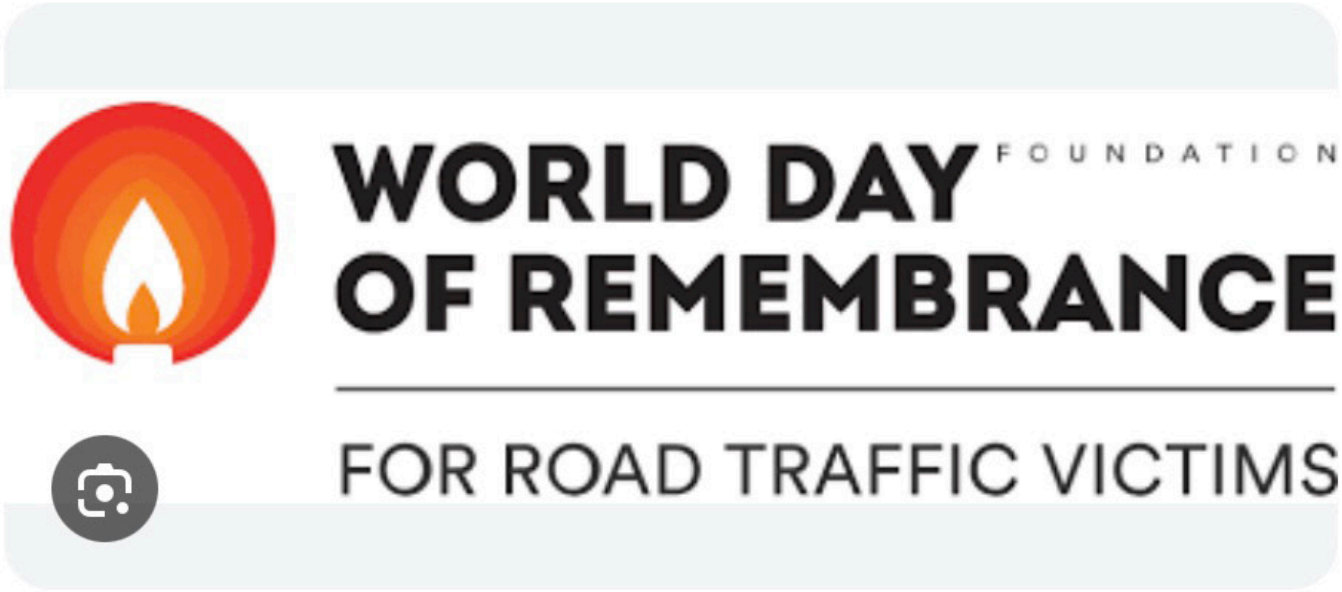


Remembering Those Lost on Ocean Beach Road

By Marie Deatherage

Sunday, November 15, 2026



Author's Note:
I've been doing research for this article for a few months now, wondering if I would ever finish. When I learned that Sunday, November 15, 2026 is World Day of Remembrance for Road Traffic Victims, I decided to post what I have so far in honor of that day, which is observed across the globe. The day of remembrance was first established in 1993 in the United Kingdom and officially adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2005. Its purpose is to honor millions of people killed or seriously injured in road traffic crashes, recognize the emotional and economic devastation experienced by families and communities, and push for better legal responses, victim support and evidence-based safety interventions.

The only formal event I found in Washington is at Downtown Bellevue Park in Bellevue, from 1:30-2:30 pm. There is a website to register for the event and contribute to the organization's database.

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I wonder if there is any interest in having a local remembrance, based around the roadside memorials on Ocean Beach Road. Even without a formal activity, maybe it would be a good day to travel the road with the express purpose of honoring our local crash victims whose stories are included below.

This report is in two parts. The first part tells the stories of the lives respresented by roadside memorials on Ocean Beach Road. The second part explores questions about traffic safety and particular challenges of OBR.

Part I: Roadside Memorial Stories

Background

When we moved to the North Beach in 2018, I was immediately struck by the roadside memorials along the local highways. Having moved from Portland, Oregon, after living in the heart of that city for 44 years, we hadn't spent very much time on rural two-lane roads for decades. And roadside memorials are not so common in cities, maybe because there's less public right-of-way to place these witness posts.



This median added to SE 43rd Ave and Howthorne Boulevard after Fallon Smart was killed by a speeding driver in 2016.

Actually, now there is an unofficial memorial in our old Portland inner-city neighborhood. The year before we moved away, 15-year-old Fallon Smart died while crossing the street at an intersection a few blocks from our home. It's impossible to call her death a traffic accident because the driver of the car that killed her was driving 55-60 miles an hour in a 20 mph zone. The suspect was a 20-year-old from Saudi Arabia, who posted bail and fled the country before standing trial. (This tragic injustice led to the U.S. State Department establishing the "Fallon Smart Policy" in 2023 to impose visa restrictions on foreign officials who help nationals evade U.S. justice.)

There had long been complaints about excessive speed where the fatality happened, and the tragedy sparked local "guerrilla" traffic calming efforts until the Portland Bureau of Transportation installed a permanent crosswalk and median island. Community members are using the median to remember Fallon by leaving flowers there, even 10 years later. In August 2026, family, neighbors, and advocates gathered at the crosswalk to remember her, celebrate her vibrant personality, and continue advocating for safer pedestrian streets.

The presence of the memorials here on the North Beach brought up two things for me:

1. I wondered how the number of fatalities on Ocean Beach Road compared with other similar routes and whether it is considered a dangerous road, and what can be done to make it safer.
2. I couldn't stop thinking about the people who lost their lives here and the loved ones left behind, especially the mothers. I need to know they aren't forgotten.

The Role of Roadside Memorials

Roadside memorials have been around for a long time, as a way to mark where a person took their last breath, providing a physical place to visit, pray, and feel close to the deceased and honor the person lost by erecting crosses, flowers, photos, and other mementos. Many markers also act as a visual reminder of the road's danger, encouraging people to drive safely or avoid reckless behavior behind the wheel.

Informal memorials are actually not legal on public right of way on state highways in Washington. But the rules are a lot more flexible on county roads like Ocean Beach Road, a 20 mile long road from Highway 101 north of Hoquiam and heading in a northwest direction to Pacific Beach, where it meets up with State Highway 109.

Ocean Beach Road is the one I drive more than any other, living where we do. Five roadside memorials are visible along the road at the time I'm writing this in October 2026. One that was visible when we moved here has disappeared, while another re-emerged after brush was cleared. Four have been added in the eight years we've lived here due to new crashes.

Ocean Beach Road Statistics

I asked the Washington Traffic Safety Commission for data for Ocean Beach Road and learned there are records of 12 fatalities on OBR from 1996 to 2026. (See table below).

That number rises to 13 if we include the one at the intersection of Ocean Beach Road and Hwy 101, which I am doing here. Then I increased the number to 14 after learning that one of the women who died was pregnant.

The fatalities have been spread over all seasons of the year, but were most common in fall and winter. Weather conditions were clear in seven of the crashes and the time of day was fairly evenly spread.

Notably, the greatest number of fatalities in a year was in 1997, when four people died in separate crashes.

The most striking thing about these deaths was the fact they were all young people, ranging in age from 15 to 32 (and one fetus). They left behind at least 10 young children.

Fatal Crashes on Ocean Beach Road, 1996-2026

Year	Crash Date	Crash Time	Crash Month	Primary Traffic Way	Weather
1996	1/23/96	16:45	January	9423	Sleet or Hail
1997	2/27/97	12:29	February	94230	Clear
1997	9/11/97	23:40	September	94230	Clear
1997	11/9/97	15:46	November	94230	Clear
1997	12/27/97	19:25	December	94230	Rain
2006	4/1/06	7:21	April	OCEAN BEACH RD	Clear
2010	11/27/10	6:47	November	OCEAN BEACH RD	Not Reported
2012	12/21/12	16:05	December	CR-OCEAN BEACH RD	Rain
2017	11/21/17	21:45	November	CR-OCEAN BEACH RD	Rain
2022	10/22/22	21:55	October	CR-OCEAN BEACH RD	Clear
2023	5/30/23	1:48	May	CR-OCEAN BEACH RD	Clear
2024	9/8/24	12:24	September	CR-OCEAN BEACH RD	Rain

Fatal Crash at the Intersection of Hwy 101 & Ocean Beach Road,

2022	8/12/22	August	Hwy 101 & OBR	Clear



This sculpture was created by sculptor Albert Gyorgy affter the death of his wife to express the raw emptiness, isolation, and hollow ache that profound grief leaves behind. It is located by Lake Geneva, Switzerland.

Why This Hurts So Much

By far the most difficult thing I have faced in my life has been the death of my son. Nothing else compares. If you have not experienced this — and I desperately hope you have not — you do not know just how empty it is possible to feel. The sculpture pictured above comes closest to capturing it, I think.

I'm not out to prove that mothers have a stronger bond than fathers. I'm only writing what I know. And I know I can't imagine a stronger connection than the one between a mother and child. After all, during pregnancy, a small number of fetal cells cross the placenta and enter the mother's bloodstream and tissues. Remarkably, some of these cells can remain in our bodies for decades. There's a name for it: fetal microchimerism. (I had to look up how to pronounce it: It breaks down into four main parts: "my-cro", "ky" [rhymes with eye], "meer" [like the animal meerkat], and "iz-uhm")

Researchers have found fetal cells in mothers 20–50 years after giving birth. They've been detected in our blood, bone marrow, skin, liver, lungs, thyroid, kidneys, and even the brain. In many cases, these are living cells that contain the child's complete genetic material, including DNA.

I'm telling you, this has to mean something. When I learned this, I thought, "No wonder." There's a belonging. A profound connection. Nothing else like it. Biological destiny. I believe that's why the loss is so painful. Why the grief hurts so much. Why it's possible to miss someone more than anyone can imagine.

So when I see or hear of someone's death, I immediately think of the mother. I hope she is not left behind. Thankfully, usually she leaves first because she is older. But not always. Sometimes life goes against biology.

That's the grief I know too well. To be honest, I'm a lot more familiar with grief than I wish I were. It's always there, just a smidge under the surface, even though he will have been gone 12 years when 2026 winds down. Sometimes, let's say oftentimes, the grief leaks out without warning. As they say, it is the price of love.

Who We Lost

A while back I decided to try to get to know the stories of the people being remembered beside the road so I could learn about their lives and understand just how much we lost when they passed. Naturally, my instinct was to see if I could find their mothers. I used a combination of online research of public records, talking with people who have lived in the area for a long time, tracking down people I thought might be connected, and putting questions on a local Facebook group.

It took a while, but I have finally gathered enough information to write what I found and share it with anyone who is interested. I wasn't always able to get directly in touch with mothers or other immediate family members. Sometimes I had to rely on items I found published online.

My motivation is simple: when I face my emotions about the loss of my son in 2014, and keep working to uncover layer after layer of pain and anguish it causes me, I land on what I think the single most frightening thing— the part that lives at my very core: the notion that he would be forgotten. And it could become like he never lived. Never made the world a better place like he surely did. And that I just can't bear.

Maybe this makes no sense. After all, someday in the very distant future our sun will flame out and collapse and take with it our planet and solar system and any record of its existence. So at some point, everyone will be forgotten. I know all that. So maybe my fear is irrational. That doesn't make it any less real for me. When I think of Blaine being forgotten, my throat closes and I can't breathe, I feel like I am collapsing within myself. I just panic.

My computer has a butt ton of words I've written about Blaine. Someday when I feel they are ready, I will release them to the world. But they're not ripe yet. In a documentary I watched the other day, someone said that as long as someone speaks your name out loud, you are not dead. That feels right to me. No wonder I love it when I hear Blaine's name spoken and Ric and I speak of him often.

So maybe I can start by helping others not be forgotten, at least in a small, local way. I want everyone to have a chance to know who these roadside memorials on Ocean Beach Road honor. So what follows is a summary of what I have learned about them. Mostly from talking with their mothers.

As I learned their stories, I began to realize that the losses of lives on Ocean Beach Road have been of young people of the North Beach. In my view, they represent the best and the brightest lights for the future of this place. They are all remarkably beautiful people. So much promise, so much service, so much potential. But most of all, so much love.

Please take the time to really pay attention when you pass them. Say their names. If you can do it safely, slow down and pay them your respects. Contribute your honor. Always send love to their mothers. And others who love them still.

I'm going to go through each one, starting at the western end of Ocean Beach Road (OBR) at Pacific Beach and heading southeast to Highway 101. Bear in mind, these are only those losses that are marked by memorials. There are six others whose stories are left to be told.

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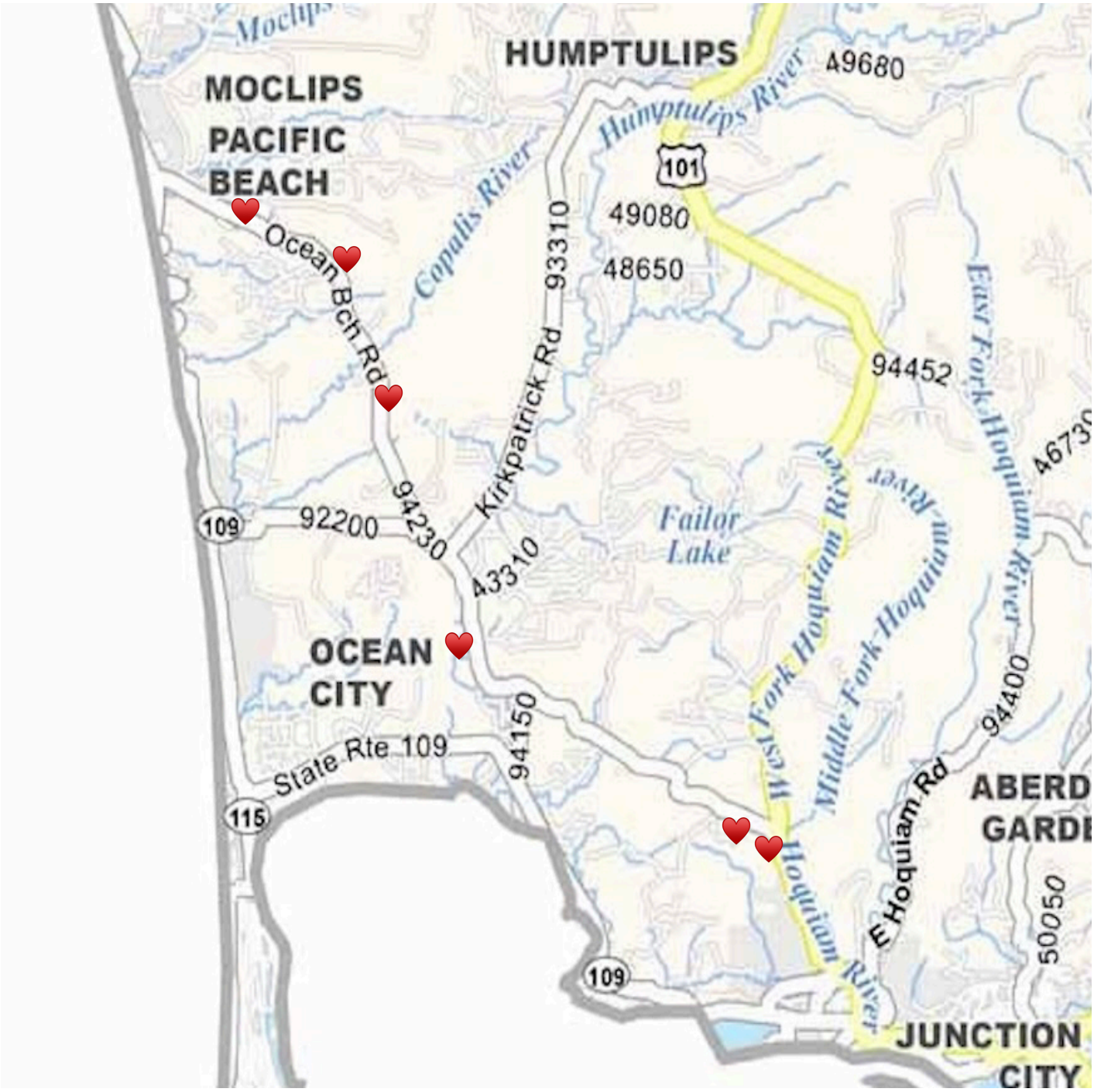


Each heart marks the approximate location of a present and/or recent roadside memorial on Ocean Beach Road



Elisa M. Shrader
December 17, 1976 — January 23, 1996

This is the one I noticed most recently, and it actually turns out to be the oldest one. It's on the north side of the road between Aloha Storage and the four way stop where OBR intersects with Highway 109. I think it became more visible when some brush was cleared next to the road, as it's tucked back into the woods a ways. You have to watch for it or you may miss it. It reminds me of a little fairyland.

It was Tuesday, January 23, in 1996. Elisa Shrader had just turned 19 the month before and was finishing her senior year at Aberdeen high school. She had stayed late after school to take part in the drama club. While driving home, a man driving a pick up crossed the center line and hit her car head on. Elisa did not survive the crash.

It was just Elisa and her mom Laurel who lived at their home in Pacific Center after Laurel's husband left, so Elisa was the center of Laurel's world. Do not ever underestimate the courage it takes for a mom to keep going after she loses a child.





It didn't help when Laurel learned that the driver of the pickup did not even have a license to operate a vehicle. He was cited for no license and for crossing the center line, but that was the total sum of his legal penalty.

Sometimes the grief hits keep coming. In this case, thieves stole Elisa's brass nameplate and broke the marble on the family crypt at the Hoquiam Cemetery. The City of Hoquiam was supposed to replace the marble, but for about a year, a piece of plywood sat in its place. The fix was finally made but Laurel says it's not the same quality as before.

Laurel notes that her daughter loved life and was active in a number of school groups, notably drama and debate club. Her 'happy-go-lucky' outlook meant she had lots and lots of friends, and they were the ones who helped create the roadside memorial, beginning with flowers from the funeral service held nearby. In fact there were so many floral arrangements, they ran out of room so moved some of them to the spot where the crash had taken place.

Laurel Hedin is getting older now and it's now physically impossible for her and her husband Scott to keep the memorial all cleared and trimmed in the wooded area there by OBR by themselves. Now friends have been taking care of it, for which Laurel is ever grateful.

Even though more than 30 years have passed since her daughter's death, Laurel still keeps Elisa's room ready for her, much as it was. She tells me she is still taking things day by day. That's how she keeps going.

You might like to know that Elisa's favorite flower was a yellow rose. I've noticed new ones have been appearing. Maybe we can bring more to her. ❣️



Elizabeth ‘Lizzy’ Capoeman
November 10, 1999 — October 22, 2022



I vividly remember the first time I saw this memorial. It stands out like a beacon on the left side of the road as you're heading toward Hoquiam. I just knew this was a well known and well loved person. Sure enough, when I asked on Facebook if anyone could tell me about who this remembered, there were a number of replies, with comments describing her as beautiful, free spirited Lizzy who was sparkly, funny, loving and so much more and who is missed every single day.

Elizabeth "Lizzy" Capoeman passed away from injuries sustained in a single-vehicle automobile accident on Ocean Beach Road on October 22, 2022. She was 22 years old. Lizzy was raised in the Taholah area and graduated from Hoquiam High School in 2018. She was a gifted athlete who competed in state championships for the long jump and triple jump, alongside years of gymnastics.

I was so grateful to hear from her mother, Melissa Capoeman:

"This is a memorial site for our beautiful beloved daughter. Elizabeth "Lizzy" Capoeman. She was in a fatal car accident here on October 22, 2022. She was so young but so full of life at only 22 years old.

"Ever since the Creator blessed us and this world with our daughter she was always on the go. She wanted to do something, it didn't matter what but she had to be busy. She had a free spirit and that's how she received her ancestral name "TsowSpiis" (FREE SPIRIT) and we had always related that to an Eagle. That's why there is an eagle feather on the cross. Also she LOVED sunflowers so we decorated the cross with lots of light up sunflowers.

"Lizzy was a member of the Quinault Indian Nation. She had lived a short life but lived it to the fullest. Everyone she crossed paths with remembered her and ended up having a story about her. Her heart was so full of love & care. She never judged anyone. If someone didn't like her then they really didn't get a chance to know her or she made an effort to try and change that. When she walked into a room it lit up and she was the center of attention. We Miss her every second of every day." ❣️



The curve and narrow shoulder on Ocean Beach Road at this point, with a steep drop into a ditch, make it challenging to get a clear photo of this memorial for Donna Rose Comenout and her unborn child. It must have been very difficult to construct and place it.





Donna Rose Comenout
January 29, 1993 —
September 8, 2024

This memorial was the most recent one I've seen on OBR. It's been challenging to get a clear photo because it's located at a curve where it feels dangerous to try to get to the very narrow shoulder next to a steep drop-off into a ditch. According to police, a witness who was traveling behind a passenger car carrying two adults and two children saw the car go off the roadway and roll multiple times. Donna Rose Comenout was pronounced deceased at the scene. After further investigation, the driver of the car was arrested and charged with vehicular homicide and reckless endangerment. His trial is scheduled for February 2027, having been postponed several time.

I was confused by what looks like two memorials at the site until I leaned through court documents that she had been pregnant at the time of her death.

I found her obituary and beautiful service announcement online. ❣️



Donna Rose Comenout
xwixwālā

"Donna left to walk with her ancestors on September 8, 2024. Donna was born on January 29, 1993, in South Bend, Washington, to Shannon A. Comenout, Sr. and Julie Ann Robinson.

"Donna, an enrolled Quinault Tribal Member, lived in the beautiful coastal community of Taholah, Washington. She was deeply connected to her heritage and actively participated in tribal gatherings, where she would often be found dancing and celebrating her culture. In addition to her strong cultural ties, Donna deeply appreciated the outdoors. She enjoyed harvesting natural resources, camping, swimming, and leisurely walks along the stunning beaches near her home. A devoted fan of the Taholah Chitwhins, she took great pride in her local community and traditions.

However, her true passion lay in baking and spending quality time with her family. Whether engaging in playful beach kickball, energetic backyard volleyball, or competitive games of Uno around the table, Donna cherished these moments with her loved ones. Known for her infectious laughter and entertaining storytelling, she was the life of any gathering. Her delightful sense of humor never failed to fill the room with infectious laughter, but it was definitely not for the faint-hearted."





The photo above was taken when Lily Chen's memorial was still visible, but vegetation growth and weathering has made it hard to find now. The lack of shoulder and steep drop off makes it hard to feel safe at this location.



Lily Chen
March 24, 1988 — November 21, 2017

I tried to find any part of this memorial, but I think it's been made invisible by weathering and/or covered by vegetation. It was present when we first moved to the North Beach in early 2018. I remembered it after I was shown a photo by someone whose wife knew Lily and I found more information online. I tried to get an updated photo but the road is so narrow here I couldn't find a safe way to do so.

Lily Chen was a single mother of two young daughters and was living in Aberdeen. Investigators said it appeared her car had been traveling northbound on OBR and likely hydroplaned, left the road, hit an electric pole and landed submerged in a ditch full of water. She left behind two young daughters, Ariana who would be 18 now, and Lilliana who would be 13.

Lily had graduated from North Beach Junior-Senior High School in Ocean Shores and Gene Juarez Academy and was working as a hair stylist. According to her brother Mathew, writing on social media, "Lily followed her passion all her life. She started cutting and styling hair in her early teens. She constantly challenged herself, finding new clients, working at salons, and even cut hair in some of our kitchens. She always believed in dreams, to follow them, and if you couldn't make it happen, keep pushing and trying."

In his online posts, Mathew wrote "this was, thus far, the hardest thing I've had to do in my life, I'm sending you all positive vibes that you may never have to deal with this as it has been the hardest journey I've had to take with my family. Just like everyone else this holiday season, none of us expected this to happen."

"Tell your loved ones, you love them, as you never know what will happen the next moment." ❣️



Austin Smythe
June 26, 1990 — May 30, 2023

Austin Smythe died just before 2 am on Tuesday, May 30, 2023, following a single-vehicle crash on Ocean Beach Road near Hoquiam. According to the police report, the vehicle left the roadway, struck a guardrail and then a telephone pole.

Austin's memorial is close to the southeastern end of Ocean Beach Road, which means he was only a mile from home when his vehicle left the road.

Austin's mom Laurie Hardy had tried for two years to become pregnant. Finally, on June 26, 1990, Austin was born. He was the center of the close extended family: a first child, first grandchild and first great grandchild. Laurie describes him as very funny, a silly jokester who always very busy. He had grown up between Elma and McCleary his whole life until he got a job jon the North Beach and moved to the Harbor.

Austin was driving home from work, where he was a well loved employee, known for working many extra hours, staying late to finish a job, taking extra shifts to help out co-workers, and stepping up to do way more than his job required. He fell asleep while driving after working many long days in a row. Laurie had talked with her son earlier that day and she remembers him telling her he was exhausted.

The roadside memorial was constructed by his co-workers almost immediately. They stayed up all night to get it done and put it in place, singing in native language during the installation ceremony.

Laurie has seen photos of the memorial and a video of its creation, but she cannot bring herself to drive on Ocean Beach Road. It's just too painful. She needed to drive to Seabrook the following week to finish furnishing and decorating a home for someone there but had to drive the longer alternative route. Laurie wants to remember her son's life, not the end of it. Not that there's any escaping that.

Austin's legacy includes three sons (Joshua now 14, Douglas almost 12, and Owen age 9). The boys were everything to him, Laurie says. He was also "such a good son."

Every time the phone rings earlier in the morning than it should, Laurie's trauma slaps right up to the surface, triggering impossibly painful memories of the call that changed her life forever. As it always will. ❣️





Austin Smythe as a boy (above) and not long before he passed (below).


LOVE YOU SON
Tharan Dean Buzzy Pettis
January 26 2007 -
August 12 2022
ALWAYS
IN OUR
HEARTS

Tharan Dean "Buzzy" Pettis
January 26, 2007 — August 12, 2022

The memorial at the intersection where Ocean Beach Road meets Hwy 101 is the first of the OBR memorials that caught my eye after we moved here. It was clear right away that this was a dearly loved person, with items added to the wooden cross suggesting it was a memorial for a child. Over time I discovered that the site was a memorial for a teenage boy who had been in a car driven by an adult who was driving while impaired. As a result, the driver was later sentenced to prison.

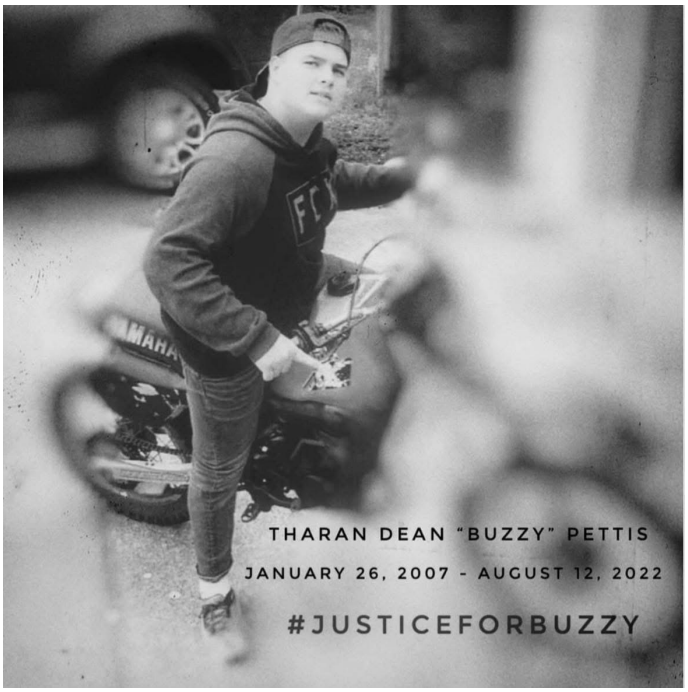
The teen's official name was added to the cross — Tharan Dean Pettis, who was known as Buzzy. Every time I passed by I thought of his mother and hoped she was okay. But I knew her heart had to be breaking. After a year or so, an official highway sign was added nearby on Hwy 101, with a plea to PLEASE DRIVE SOBER in Buzzy's memory.

Earlier this year, after finishing a huge project that had me focused for 12 hours a day for several weeks, I decided to treat myself to a facial at a nearby spa, something I do only every few years. While lying on the table and having wet cool things applied to my face, the woman said something that suddenly had me asking her, "OMG are you Buzzy's mom?!?"

It turned out she was. To be honest, I don't remember much about the facial after that point… not because it wasn't great, but because Rachel Stevenson and I had a remarkable conversation sharing our grief. And that conversation was what convinced me that yes indeed, I need to do the research about the OBR memorials and write the stories of the people who need to be remembered. I had thought about doing it for quite some time, but I feared I would be invading privacy or opening wounds, and I didn't really know how and where to begin to overcome that or find people who knew them. Meeting Rachel was the key that unlocked the door that led here and to these words today.



Above, Rachel Stevenson and Buzzy when he was her tow-headed little boy. Below is the photo used to bring justice to Buzzy in court.



Witnessing Grief

I think it's critical to witness the pain these crashes inflict on the loved ones of those whose lives are taken. Something needs to awaken our compassion so each and every time we take to our cars we are looking out for our own safety and the well being of every other person who travels these roads.

It is a rare gift to hear from a mother who is willing to express her raw unfiltered grief. We are taught to soften our words and delivery to make them more bearable to hear. Sometimes I wonder if cultures whose end of life rituals include loud public keening and wailing have a healthier approach? We seem so uncomfortable observing and hearing from grieving people. It feels like there is a short half life for acceptable expressions of grief. Yes, we realize you are tired of hearing about our broken hearts... but can you imagine how sick we are of feeling them breaking. Is it that hearing of our grief reminds all of us of our own mortality and we don't know how to come to terms with that? I don't know.

To escape the filters on some social media, I've noticed it's no longer permissible to use the word "dead' or 'death" so people get around it by using the word unalived. We sanitize our heartbreak. Some users believe softer or coded language makes heavy or traumatic topics easier to discuss or less triggering for audiences.

I think this is a mistake. How can we function as a society when nobody is allowed to be triggered by really tragic things? Shouldn't we all have heightened awareness and honest acknowledgement of potential deadly consequences every time we get behind the wheel?

Everybody needs to know how much this hurts. We mothers have to become different people just to survive a loss like this. If everybody understands this, I believe we will be more compassionate toward one another. Who among us would want to inflict this pain on anyone?

Rachel Stevenson not only admits her pain but is also willing to share the raw and honest grief she feels. Please hear her and bear witness. Share her words with everyone you know. Especially those who speed, drive while intoxicated or using their phones or otherwise drive in a way that endangers themselves and others on our roadways. We all need to share her pain.

Rachel in her own words:

"The day prior was the day the first day I had seen Buzzy in a long time. He moved to North Dakota with his grandparents because he was struggling in Washington. School and kids he was around were not the best influences on him. He was doing so good over there too.

"So he had got into town the night prior really late and let me know. The next morning, the one day I saw him alive, he spent the entire day with me from bright and early morning to late dark night. My boyfriend and I made a huge dinner of crab, steaks, etc. and he ate like the big boy he was. At about 11:30 pm he wanted to go to his grandparents house in town so his best friend could spend the night with him. I remember the last words I said to him were 'I love you so much.'

"On August 12, 2022, it was about 8 am when I got a text asking me "hey mom I'm gonna go with my friends okay?" I of course answered 'okay love you.' I thought he would text me later that day and tell me he needed me to pick him up.

"Buzzy was the kind of kid who everyone loved. He was helpful, kind and full of love. He helped anyone he could and never got into trouble. He was the most beautiful baby. When he was little he was a tow head with beautiful big blue eyes. He was my little mama's boy and had the sweetest little voice.

'I want people to know that he was a victim of a vehicular homicide. That I loved him with every ounce of my soul. He was my second born and I stayed in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit with him for a month after he was born. He is the one I worried about all the time, he was not afraid of anything. I think it's important for people to know that my son was given a short life and that his loss has been extremely devastating.

"Seeing your child in a casket is so painful, there is nothing you can do to change death. You can't fix it, you can't bring them back and no matter how many

times you beg god to give them back he doesn't. I spent the first year in a world of my own, I can't even remember anything really from the moment my son was in a casket to two years down the road. Everything feels like it's not real, like life doesn't make sense or mean anything anymore. It all feels so pointless, like if you can bring a child into this world and someone you don't even know can take them, why do we do it?

"I try to believe that my son was too good for this world. He had the most beautiful heart and an old soul, I truly believe he has lived many lives. I was so fortunate to call him mine for a small amount of time. I would give anything to have him back, he made my life a better place from the day I found out I was pregnant. I have never missed someone so much in my life. I find myself looking up at the sky on the nights that are beautiful and praying that it's my son making it that way.

"About the memorial for my son. My boyfriend was coming home late for a good month. One night before Christmas I was so upset I didn't have a cross for my son for Christmas, I thought that would be my present to him, a reminder by the road so nobody can forget what happened that day. Anyways, my boyfriend showed up after work and had this metal cross he had been working on in his hand. It was the most amazing gift I have ever had given to me. It was so sad but so happy at the same time, bittersweet. It was absolutely perfect and also something I never in a million years thought I would be wanting. A cross to place where my child's life was taken. A place to remember the short life he had and the fact that he was once a part of this place.

"I knew people will now know my baby lost his life but they wouldn't know his story. I found a website where you can order QR codes that link to a website and so I made one. On his cross there is a QR code you scan and it takes you to his page. I live in fear that people will forget, there's some whose life will never be the same after that day like myself.

"I feel as though my son is honored in daily life by myself, his grandparents who adored him and helped raise him. Also the rest of his family. Buzzy touched a lot of lives in the short amount of time he was on this earth. Each and every one of those people honor them



Washington has a program families can use to order official highway signs to remember their family members and encourage safe driving. They are the only kind permitted on state highways.

in their lives. There is one special woman who was the only friend who showed up when he died. She treated my son like he was her own. I know that at the time of his loss a lot of people in Washington were devastated but also North Dakota where his dad lived. It was so touching to see the love my son showed the world.

"My son's killer was out of jail for two months after the accident. It was so gut aching, heart pounding and confusing seeing this man. When the day of sentencing finally approached I don't think I slept, ate or thought for a few days before. We made 'Justice for Buzzy' shirts and went into that courtroom. The people who came to support me was really nice. I hold a spot in my heart for everyone who made an effort to try to make this easier for me. My son's killer was cold and never once apologized when I read my victims impact statement, he wouldn't even acknowledge it. I poured

my heart out to this man who took my son's life, he wouldn't even do I'm sorry. He disgusted me and to be honest it took everything in my power not to jump over that table and make him look in my eyes and see the pain I endured that morning. I knew in my head that justice will be served and he will have to answer someone up there in the sky.

"The man was given 12 years, less years than my son was even on this earth. The woman judge gave him the max sentence, for that I was super grateful. Nothing will ever make the hate I have for him go away. I wish with all my heart I could. He didn't care for my son or his friend who was in the car with him. The kid that was in the front seat was the man's own son. All three boys were thrown out of the car because there were no working seatbelts. If I had known that, Buzzy would maybe be here today. The crazy part is Buzzy had extreme anxiety from riding in cars. So to lose his life in a car is really mind blowing, it's almost like he knew.

"The official highway sign for him was something I asked my family for because my sister had mentioned it. My sister loved Buzzy like her own so she went about getting the sign out for him. It reads PLEASE DRIVE SOBER IN MEMORY OF BUZZY PETTIS. When I first saw it I was sick to my stomach and also crying tears of I don't even know what the feeling was.

Rachel has been doing more work on the memorial at the intersection. "I made him a new cross and I also have tons of new items to go out there. I try to keep up with it. That place is the only place I can go and feel like he's with me."

"My son would have touched your heart had you met him. He was a good boy and loved his family. He will be forever missed, loved and cherished. I will never be the same as I was the day he died. I miss my baby so much I would give my life to have his life back.

"Honestly I am not okay, I am broken hearted. I don't know who I am anymore and I keep going on some days for my other sons. I've begged god to take me and he hasn't listened. I want my baby." ❣️

Each time you drive on OBR, please remember Elisa and Lizzy and Donna Rose and Lily and Austin and Buzzy. And keep Rachel and Laurie and and Mathew and Jewelz and Melissa and Laurel and all their family members and friends in your hearts.

And please drive like you are saving their lives.

Part II: Can Lives Like These Be Saved? Imagining a Fatality-free Ocean Beach Road

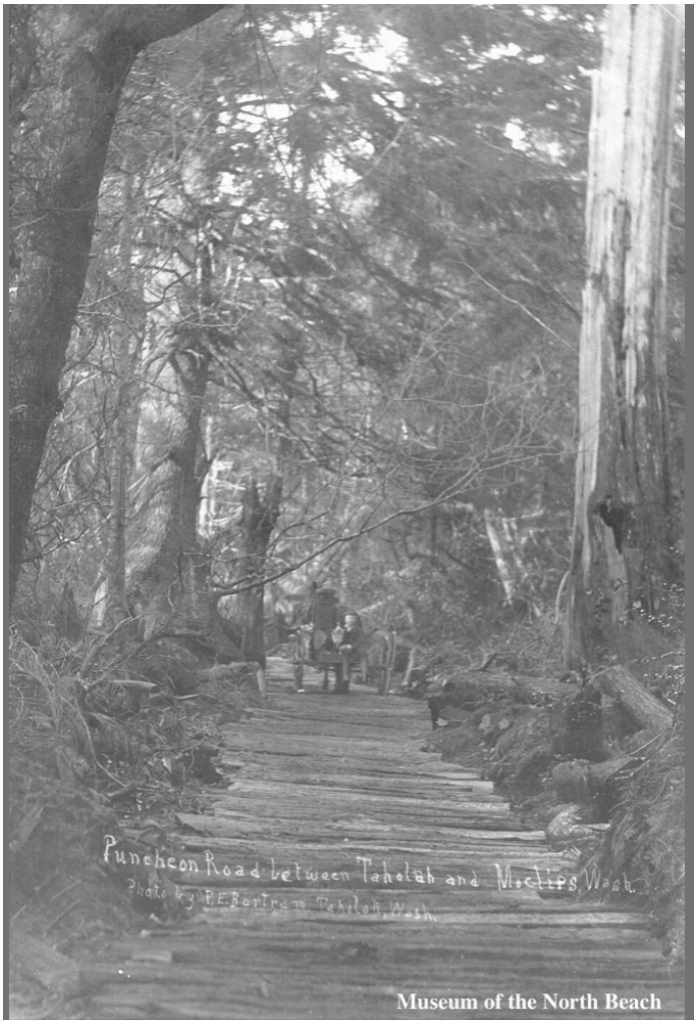
Until I started this research, I didn't know that the United States officially has a vision of zero traffic deaths by the year 2050. More on that in a bit. But first let's look at understanding rural traffic challenges.

According to the Washington Traffic Safety Commission, the state agency charged with reducing traffic collisions, people traveling on rural roads are 63% more likely to die in traffic crashes than in urban areas. From 2017 to 2021, more than 83,000 people in the US died on rural roadways, accounting for 43 percent of all roadway deaths despite only 20 percent of the U.S. population residing in these areas and significantly lower vehicle miles. In 2022 alone, there were 17,283 motor vehicle traffic fatalities that occurred in rural areas, and the fatality rate per 100 million vehicle miles traveled was 1.5 times higher in rural areas.

There are several reasons rural roads are more fatal. According to crash reports, most rural fatalities happen when vehicles veer off the road into trees, ditches, or steep drop-offs. That was the case in four of the six crashes marked by the roadside memorials on OBR. Older rural layouts also feature sharp curves, narrow lanes, blind hills, and limited lighting, all issues on this road.

The route taken by OBR followed trails used by indigenous people through the woods that often became saturated with water during the rainy season. The earliest mechanized access to the resorts on the beach at Moclips-by-the-Sea was not by road but via the Northern Pacific Railroad in 1904. When automobiles arrived in western Washington around the turn of the century and able to make it to Copalis Crossing and then to Copalis Beach, they had to travel the last 10- plus miles to Moclips by driving on the beach. In fact, literature from the time referred to the big wide beach as a speedway that featured automobile races. Now it has the only authorized beach landing airstrip in the country.

The nine-mile-long road from Copalis Crossing to Pacific Beach through Carlisle and Aloha wasn't



This was what OBR first looked like before it was paved (the road pictured here was nearby between Moclips and Taholah. (Photo from Museum of the North Beach)

finished until 1913, and consisted of split logs laid horizontally on a gravel bed. It was a single lane, with turnouts every 500 feet where cars backed up or pulled over and waited for an oncoming car to pass. When the rain was heavy enough, the logs floated off the road, which became impassable until the water drained into the ground and the logs were put back in place.

Improvements were made gradually over the years, with the road widened to two lanes, the bed raised above the water table, then finally paved. OBR is still narrow, with steep slopes into ditches 15 feet or more deep, mere inches from the roadway in places. There is no forgiveness for drivers who inadvertently make the slightest mistake, which we humans all do sometimes.

Power poles stand right next to the roadway and there are very few guardrails. There are almost no turnouts where slower cars can pull over and let cars backed up behind them pass safely. In several areas there have been attempts to slightly widen the shoulder, but often there is simply no room to do so. I can't imagine how much it would cost to truly widen the road, but it has to be less than the value of lives lost on the roadway.

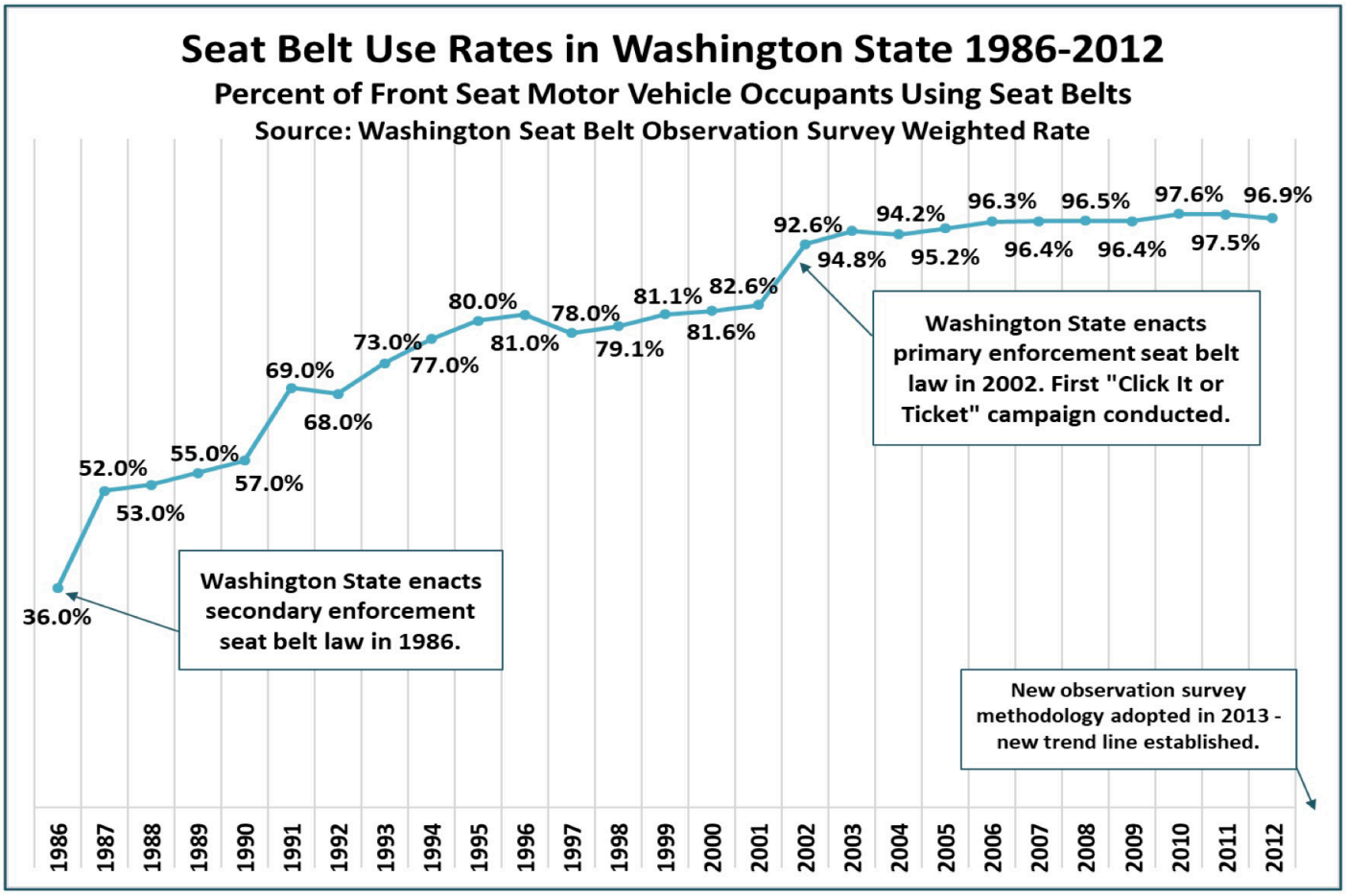
Rural crashes are more fatal because emergency response takes more than twice as long on average in rural areas. Emergency medical services are not actually mandated by law in Washington, and rural areas are usually served by fire districts that added ambulance service to their fire prevention and suppression services over time. Many have no paramedics and may even be staffed entirely by volunteers.

Seat Belts

Seat belt use is a particularly important element of the discussion, because data shows it reduces serious crash-related injuries and deaths by about half. Use of seat belts is lower among both rural drivers and passengers and **Grays Harbor County has the lowest seat belt use among all counties in the state of Washington.** As of the latest year reported (2024), 84% of drivers in this county use seat belts, while the statewide percent is 95%.

Seat belts are an example of a legally mandated safety requirement that changed driver behavior remarkably over time. Those of us old enough can remember when cars didn't even have seat belts, then having to learn to use them and make it a habit. The graph below that charts seat belt use in Washington shows the effect of secondary and primary enforcement laws. (Secondary enforcement allows ticketing for no seat belt when stopped for another infraction, primary enforcement allows ticketing stops for not using seat belt).

There is less law enforcement presence in rural areas. In Grays Harbor County, the sheriff's department has 4-5 officers on patrol at any given time, covering 1,847 square miles of unincorporated area that represents 97% of the county, or 370 square miles per officer. No wonder they are a rare sight on the North Beach. In fact, there are three fewer officers on duty than there



were in 2021 due to budget limitations. That likely means enforcement does not increase seat belt usage as much as it does in more patrolled areas where "click it or ticket" patrols regularly happen.

Data collected by National Highway Traffic Safety Administration found that not using seat belts is more common among rural drivers in general, but especially young men whose overall behavior is characterized as riskier. Rural roads have less traffic, so drivers can develop a sense that there isn't that much danger from other cars as long as they are safe drivers themselves. Some think air bags replace seat belts but that is not true. Some still fear using a seat belt will trap them inside a burning or sinking car, even though research shows that buckling up vastly improves survival rates. It's been suggested that maybe people in rural areas don't like to be told what to do? I'm just asking.

Seat belt use is very much a habit. When we automatically belt up each time we get in a car, we reinforce the habit. Those who work in jobs that require them to get in and out of car frequently and stop using seat belts lose the habit and more easily forget to buckle up. Austin Smythe's mother saw that happen with her son, who once used his seat belt religiously (he even has it on in the photo on page 19). But after working at Seabrook, where the speed limit is 10 mph and seat belt use can feel unnecessary, she thinks he lost the habit.

Seabrook reports that it has a policy that requires workers using Seabrook vehicles to use seat belts: "Our policy specifically states that all drivers and passengers operating or riding in Seabrook vehicles must wear seat belts at all times. Drivers are responsible for ensuring passenger compliance, and we actively hold our team accountable to these standards. In light of your feedback, we've also reminded our department leaders to reinforce this expectation across all teams." Even so, since I started researching this article several months ago, in my own observations I have not seen a single employee driving a Seabrook vehicle use a seat belt. I have no idea how they manage to not be harangued by the commanding voice like the one in my car that yells out a reminder if anyone in my car forgets to buckle up and won't shut up until they do.

Law enforcement officers do not issue traffic citations like seat belt avoidance on privately owned streets.

Traffic Safety

Traffic safety has several components: safer vehicles, safer roads, safer driving

Safer vehicles

Popular adoption of the automobile after World War II prodoundly changed the American landscape and lifestyle. One estimate is that in 1950 less than 17% of developed land in the U.S. was paved over in roads, parking lots, and low density development (suburban sprawl) the auto made possible. By 2020, that percent exceeded 50%.

Vehicle miles traveled in 1950 was 458 billion. In 2020, it was close to three trillion, nearly six-and-a-half times greater. Americans spend far more time in autos now than in 1950, and many services are offered through drive up facilities so leaving the car becomes unnesessary.

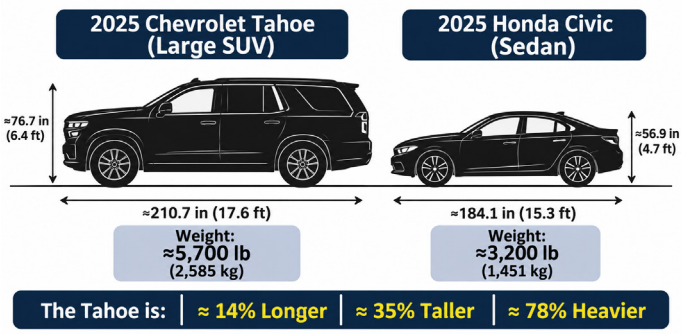
Automobiles have been transformed. In 1975, SUVs represented less than 2% of the new light vehicle market. By 2003, their market share had reached 24%. In 2024, roughly 60% of autos produced in the US were sport utility vehicles. Sedan and station wagon production declined dramatically in the same period.

SUVs began as rugged, practical vehicles designed for military, agricultural and outdoor use, but are now the preferred family vehicle for urban and suburban travel. The introduction of the Ford Explorer in 1990 was a major turning point, and the marketing appeal cited "higher seating position and visibility, a feeling of security, room for multiple passengers and cargo, and a rugged adventurous image."

The appeal to safety has been a big factor. There have been a number of both passive and active safety features added to all auto design and manufacture over the decades: anti-lock braking, three point restraint belts, multistage airbags, crumble zones, blind spot monitoring, and lane assist, to name a few.

Several additional features of trucks and sport utility vehicles were sold as upgrades that improved power and safety:

- larger engine and and greater horsepower
- higher front-end profiles
- greater vehicle weight
- more substantial body structure



This illustration shows the difference in size and weight between a currently popular SUV and sedan.

But the trend had a big effect on traffic fatalities. The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (an independent, nonprofit scientific and educational organization dedicated to reducing traffic deaths) analysis of early-1990s vehicles found people in cars hit by pickups or SUVs were about four times more likely to die than the pickups and SUV occupants. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's research from the late 1990s found large pickups and vans caused over three times the fatality rate of large cars in vehicle-to-vehicle crashes, and SUVs about twice the rate.

There are several reasons:

- **Mass:** In a two-vehicle crash, the lighter vehicle undergoes a much larger velocity change. Small vehicles also have less structure to absorb crash energy, so forces on their occupants are greater.
- **Geometry:** SUV and pickup force-absorbing structures sit higher and are stiffer, so in a head-on impact they can override the car's crumple zone and ride up over its hood.
- **Weight Asymmetry:** For cars below the ~4,000-pound fleet average, each extra 500 pounds cut the driver death rate by 17 per million registered vehicle years. For pickups above average weight, each extra 500 pounds cut the pickup driver's own risk by just 1 death but added 7 deaths among crash partners in cars

But when people hear about this fatality disparity, their instinctive response is often to better protect their own lives by upgrading to an even larger vehicle. And others who have the means keep doing the same.

It starts to feel like the musket wars in New Zealand, whose death toll has been called 'unprecedented.' The introduction of musket firearms by Europeans in the early 1800s led to what has been described as a "holocaust' among people who had formerly been limited to weapons made from wood and stone. It's cited as an example of the 'fatal impact' of indigenous contact with Europeans, which has happened so often across the globe.

The victims of the resulting carnage on the highways are those who can't afford armored cars and/or whose conscience leads them to opt for lower carbon footprints as they are put in danger on the road by vehicles designed to be fortresses for occupants. Those in lower cost light weight sedans are at greater risk in collisions. Ironically, taller and heavier vehicles often fare worse in single vehicle crashes because they are more top heavy.

What people can afford affects the size and degree of protection a vehicle provides. Large pickups and SUVs cost an average 70% more than basic compact passenger cars. This can be an issue when tourists and visitors come to the North Beach. The per capita income of Grays Harbor County ranks 34th among Washington's 39 counties. Many visitors and those with second homes on the North Beach hail from King County, where the per capita income is nearly 2.2 times higher and their vehicles reflect the disparity.

When I find myself alongside today's SUVs while walking my dog, I am often dumbstruck by their size and height. With predator names like Ram and Raptor and Gladiator, those of us in our meek little low lying retail version cars realize we will not survive an encounter. What does it say about us when those with means can protect their own families but are likely to eradicate a less protected family they encounter on a road? When the array of motor vehicles available to consumers is so wide and the amount of protection they offer ranges from military grade to commercial lite, how can we work together? Does protecting our own families absolve us from wiping out another one if it comes to that?

There is growing awareness of the inherent dangers of these larger and higher vehicles and over the past few years pressure has grown to reduce the disparity in design, but there is a long way to go. (And don't get me started on the dangers of blinding headlights and why I don't drive at night anymore.)

Studies suggest this issue can be improved. Crashes between two 1- to 4-year-old vehicles where at least one driver was killed were extracted from the Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS) for two intervals, 2011-2016 and 2017-2022.

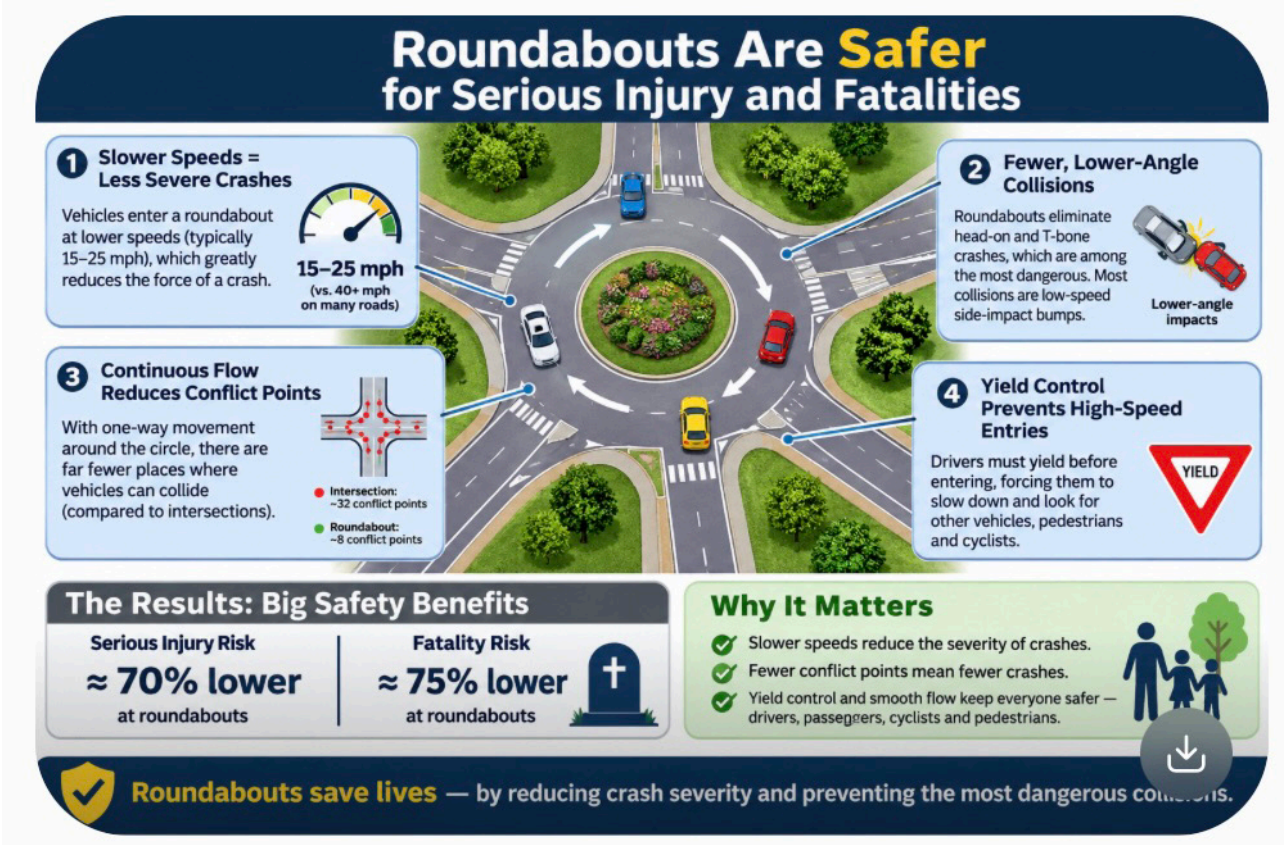
Crash incompatibility between cars and SUVs/pickups improved to some degree during that period. Pickup trucks, which had previously killed the drivers of car crash partners at 2.5 times the rate of cars, were just 1.9 times more likely in 2017-2022. Similarly, SUVs over 5,000 lb reduced their car partner death rate from 1.9 times the rate of cars to just 1.2 times. It also found that additional curb weight conferred the greatest protective benefit to lighter vehicles while not accruing much additional risk to crash partners. The reverse was true for heavier vehicles, for which additional weight provided negligible extra protection but a substantial increase in crash partner risk.

One study concluded that "Crash incompatibility in the fleet has continued to improve in recent years, particularly among the heaviest pickups and SUVs. Although curb weight remains an important factor in driver protection, data suggest that the benefit plateaus at 4,000 lb, with minimal incremental gains above this point. These findings suggest that mass reduction among the heaviest vehicles may further improve crash outcomes in the future without reducing the protectiveness of those vehicles." I wonder if some entities might see these risk issues as threats to their profitability at some point and push for change?

Safer roads

The ways in which roads are designed and constructed affect traffic safety. In rural areas, design improvements include reducing the number of obstacles that cars would strike if they run off the roads, pavements that reduce skidding, increased use of rumble strips at the center line and shoulders, crash cushions, and guardrails. Other approaches include shielding utility poles and flattening roadside ditches to give stray vehicles room to recover, and improving visibility of warning signs for hidden curves, intersection approaches and wildlife crossings. A big improvement on OBR would be pull-outs and passing lanes, especially given the mix of vehicles it carries.

There may be no development more significant for rural crash reduction than Roundabouts. While some view them as obstacles that interfere with their usual and customary travel, their purpose is improving safety. Roundabouts can reduce injury crashes at intersections by 82% because they eliminate head on



and right angle collisions. Because traffic moves more slowly, if collisions occur they are more like glancing blows with less kinetic force and many fewer injuries and deaths.

Safer driving

In an ideal world, everybody follows the rules of the road as determined by traffic engineers, using data from actual road use. Speed limits are based on engineering and safety. I am often surprised when random members of the public think they know better than people who have studied issues from a variety of sources carefully for years. To some extent, it seems drivers develop overconfidence over time, and drive faster than the limits, but that leaves them unprepared when something unpredictable happens, like an animal crosses the road or a car has stopped on the other side of a blind curve. Drivers using the same road over and over get cocky, expecting this trip to be just like the last one, leaving no room for error. They can underestimate the effect of changed road conditions.

During my investigation, I learned about the Safe Roads Challenge, an app (link from QR code below or find it in an app store) we can download onto our phones that actually helps us know how safe our own driving really is. The challenge offers rewards like gift cards, weekly contests and surprise giveaways. Any licensed Washington driver is eligible and user information is not shared or sold outside the app. It's free and entirely voluntary. Funds that provide the prizes are not from tax dollars but paid by sponsors identified on the app. There is a grand prize of $100,000 during 2026.

At a recent meeting about rural roads, the loudest voices in the room complained about people driving too slowly. A survey of Grays Harbor County drivers found that only 37% of local drivers felt driving more than 10 miles per hour over the speed limit was outright dangerous, while 58% felt it was only slightly or moderately dangerous. Thirty percent felt that driving within an hour of having two or more alcoholic drinks is only slightly or moderately dangerous.

And is everybody always running late? Why are we in such a damn hurry? And so impatient with those who aren't. As a driver who actually obeys the speed limit on OBR, I have noticed that I seem to be an annoyance to many because I'm driving too slow. Following the actual speed limit is too slow? It can feel that way on Ocean Beach Road. I've been yelled and honked at, flipped off, passed on blind curves while driving the speed limit. I would be happy to pull over and let others by if only there were places to do that, but usually there's barely even a shoulder.

OBR often has mixed use, with an array of passenger cars, pickups, SUVs, logging and other commercial trucks, delivery vans, recreational vehicles and so forth traveling together. It's not always clear that one group has empathy for other groups and we all seem quick to pass judgment and jump to conclusions, blaming others for our own impatience.

The Road to Zero

Until I started this research, I didn't know about The Road to Zero. The United States has officially adopted a goal of zero traffic deaths by the year 2050. And yes, that includes rural roads like Ocean Beach Road: "Remote rural roads are still more hazardous—they always have been—but safety technologies are particularly effective in preventing the most dangerous rural crashes, such as head-on collisions and single-vehicle run-off-the-road crashes. Safety on rural roads, where emergency response times are higher than on city streets, has been further enhanced by improvements in trauma care...and more-effective emergency medical care. Improvements in digital infrastructure in rural areas, together with widespread adoption of vehicle-to-vehicle communication can share safety information to avoid collisions. Although the safety gap between rural and urban areas has not quite closed, thanks to technology, it is narrower now than ever."

The Road to Zero Strategy

The Road to Zero has a three-prong strategy to reach the goal of zero fatalities:

- Double Down on What Works (and we already know a lot about what works)
- Accelerate Advanced Technology, and
- Prioritize Safety.

I was heartened to see that a Safe System approach assumes that "people will occasionally, but inevitably, make mistakes behind the wheel and that the overall transportation system should be designed to be forgiving so that these mistakes do not lead to fatal outcomes." The Safe System approach also involves commitment to analyze safety problems, identify changes that bring the best return on investment, and implement these improvements throughout the system to prevent further occurrences.

There has been rapid development in automated driving systems in vehicles and they may result in fewer crashes. A 2026 IIHS study found that Waymo's driverless vehicles had 68% fewer police-reportable crash involvements per mile in the same cities and miles as human drivers. Injury crashes were 81% lower. But this is limited data from one fleet and operating environment.

The challenges that exist on Ocean Beach Road are far more complex than those encountered in the Waymo study. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't keep pursuing them on the road to zero.



The Tower of Mothers by Kathe Kollwitz. Seattle Art Museum.

Final Thoughts

I began this volunteer project (that has turned into something way bigger than I imagined) simply because I do not want the people whose lives were lost on Ocean Beach Road to be forgotten. I want their mothers and other loved ones to know that the roadside memorials are seen and heard and known by all who move through the North Beach. I want them to feel lifted up by our caring thoughts, even when we don't know them personally.

Maybe another way to think about it is to say I don't want their deaths to have been in vain. These families and friends have taken the courageous and devastating step of sharing their loss and grief with all of us. The best response all of us can give might be to pledge to drive in a way that considers the potential harm we can do and pain our driving can cause. May these memorials inspire us all to be and do the very best we can. And to collectively use our public resources to the highest and best use in making vehicles and roads like OBR as safe as they can be. Believe me, whatever you can do to save even one mother's broken heart is more than you can ever know.

The image I choose to summarize my thoughts is The Tower of Mothers by Kathe Kollwitz. The bronze sculpture depicts a tight circle of mothers fiercely and defiantly protecing their children against danger.

I believe it is the greatest force in the world and can lead the way.



While I was working on this story, I looked for signs to guide my storytelling. Sometimes you come across things that need to be photographed and shared, even when you don't know the backstory. This is one I spotted on Ocean Beach Road.

Acknowlegements

Much thanks to all those who helped me in my search of information for this story and/or encouraged me to finish it. Here is my list in no particular order:

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Note: I used ChatGPT to create illustrations on pages 26-27