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Ashley Dias' legacy lives on

By Sharon K. Sobotta



A plaque commemorating Ashley Dias was erected Sept. 2 in honor of the heroic crossing guard who lost his life Sept. 8, 2021. Photo Sharon K. Sobotta

When Ashley Dias left for his post as a crossing guard outside of Stanley Middle School on Wednesday, Sept. 8, 2021, he told his mom he'd see her in a bit. That was the last time Gloria Dias saw her son alive.

"I kept listening for the door and watching the clock and I wondered why he was so slow in getting home," Gloria Dias recalls. "And then I got a call from John Muir hospital telling me that my son was there and I should come."

Ashley's siblings cautioned his mom that things must've been bad, but she didn't believe it would be that bad. When Gloria got to the hospital, she was met by her daughter Vanessa, who she remembers crying hysterically. "That's when a social worker came to me and asked me to go upstairs and identify my son's body," Gloria says. "It broke my heart. I lifted the covers and he was still warm, but covered in bruises." As Gloria stood there in shock trying to make sense of the loss of her son, an EMT approached her and told her something

that she says gave her a little bit of peace. "He told me I'm sorry your son died, but he was a hero. He said that if it wasn't for Ashley, his little girl would have been dead, as he showed me her picture."

But more tragically, Gloria says, is that if it wasn't for someone driving recklessly, all lives could have been spared. "The grandmother who ran Ashley over already had the kids she was picking up in the car. Even if she was running late, late is better than never. I will never get to see my son again."

In 2021 Ashley Dias became one of some 7,845 pedestrians killed in the United States. The number of pedestrian deaths rose to a 40-year high, according to the Governor's Highway Safety Association. This statistic has people across the nation rethinking how to keep people on foot safe. The fact that Dias died while patrolling the streets to keep other pedestrians safe around schools has Lamorinda residents grappling with the same issue. "I'm advocating for there to be a safety awareness day in honor of my son, Ashley Dias," Gloria says. "It's a time to really remind people to slow down and drive safe."

On Friday, Sept. 2 nearly 100 Lafayette residents, city officials, friends and family gathered in downtown Lafayette to remember Dias and bear witness to the unveiling of a plaque in his honor. The plaque reads: 'In memory of courageous crossing guard Ashley Dias, who was struck and killed by a vehicle on September 8, 2021 while protecting children in a crosswalk in front of Stanley Middle School. Let this be a solemn reminder of drivers to please slow down and let our children and community be safe.'

Lafayette City Attorney Mala Subramanian worked with the Dias family to determine the verbiage of the plaque. Subramanian says the message on the plaque is a good reminder not only for drivers when they're behind the wheel but to people in the world at large. "I think it's important to remember to slow down. That's an important theme for life." She added that she's been awestruck by the strength and perseverance of the Dias family since they lost Ashley.

While Ashley Dias has in a way become a poster child for the cause of slowing down, his family and friends want him to be remembered for much more than that. Dias lived and worked in the field of biotech in San Francisco until he moved back to his childhood stomping grounds of Lafayette during the pandemic to lend a hand with his mom. "My colon collapsed after my second dose of the vaccine and I needed a helping hand," Gloria says. "Since he was working remotely he came back. He took good care of me and helped me get to my appointments and made me meals that looked like they were being served in a restaurant. When he heard they needed crossing guards at school, he didn't hesitate to help. That's the kind of person he was."

Eleven-year-old Angelique Dias-Vanni is Ashley Dias's niece. She attends sixth grade at Stanley Middle School and passes the crosswalk where her uncle lost his life each day. Angelique says she has many fond memories of hiking and taste testing yogurt. "We've gotta keep moving forward in life," Angelique says. "But I'd like people to remember to drive safely. Don't drink and drive. Don't text and drive. Drive carefully and pay attention."

Three of Ashley Dias's childhood friends took turns at the mic sharing a little bit about the Ashley that they knew and came to love - a guy with a sense of humor, who accepted people as they were and kept people around him smiling. Kieren Guller traveled all the way from Arizona for the unveiling of Ashley's plaque. While Guller thinks it was heroic of Ashley to put himself in between a moving vehicle and children, he

wants Ashley to be remembered for much more than that.

"I moved around a lot as a kid and never really planted roots or knew quite where I belonged," Guller says. "When I met Ashley, it was pretty much life changing. It was like I found my home." Guller's mom died when he was just 8 years old. After that his family moved to Concord because they could no longer afford to stay in Lafayette. "My dad fought hard to keep me in the school district but it was hard. I could definitely feel the difference between my family and the families in town who had money," Guller recalls. "Ashley's family just opened their door to me. It didn't matter that he had more than I did. He never put money above our friendship. He made me feel like I belonged."



Photo Sharon K. Sobotta

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