

# INSIDE SEVEN

Jerry B. Baxter, Director

Caltrans District 7 Employee Newsletter

May 1993

## Maintenance worker Juan Thome killed by truck; is 3rd District 7 employee to die in 10 months

*By Russell Snyder*

On the day designated to remember state workers who have died on the job, District 7 Maintenance leadworker Juan Thome was struck and killed April 28 by a big rig on the Pomona Freeway in Diamond Bar.

Two other Caltrans employees, Edward Garcia and Margarita Aguilera, were hurt when the big rig slammed into their vehicles, which were parked on the shoulder of the eastbound freeway near Lemon Avenue.

"How terribly ironic it is that one of our workers died today, on Workers' Memorial Day, wearing a black arm band in remembrance of the other Caltrans workers who have died in the line of duty," said Caltrans District 7 Director Jerry B. Baxter.

"Unfortunately, this tragedy forces us to again urge all motorists to take extra care when driving through work zones. The lives of our highway workers depend on you."

Thome, 47, of Walnut, was the third District 7 employee to be killed by an errant vehicle in 10 months, bringing to 53 the number of Caltrans work-

ers statewide who have died in the past 20 years. During that same span, 39 contractor employees have lost their lives.

The most recent death occurred last July 29, when District 7 Sur-



*Photo by Janine Swiatkowski*

*Caltrans maintenance worker Margarita Aguilera is attended to by emergency workers at the scene of the April 28 crash that claimed the life of a co-worker, Juan Thome.*

**BUSER REMEMBERED:** A District 7 Survey office was dedicated in memory of Callie Joel Buser, who was killed on the job last July. See story Page 3.

vveyor Callie "Joel" Buser, 55, of Canoga Park, was run down on the Antelope Valley Freeway near Acton while he was painting aerial markers on the freeway shoulder. Just weeks earlier, on June 12, Caltrans maintenance employee Jerry Alcala, 39, of West Covina, was run down by an errant truck while working on

the shoulder of the westbound Artesia Freeway (91) in Cerritos. His co-worker, Ralph Goins, 57, of Los Angeles, was seriously injured.

Following the death of Thome, Baxter expressed dismay that driv-

ers continue to ignore cones, barricades and other devices that warn of upcoming work zones.

"Orange cones and signs are no match for vehicles that weigh thousands of pounds," Baxter said. "We must rely on the good sense and judgment of California drivers to ensure the safety of our workers. As our safety bumper stickers say, 'Give 'em a brake.'"

Last month's crash occurred as Garcia, 52, of Hesperia, and Aguilera, 28, of Pomona — employees of the Foothill Maintenance Region — were spraying a herbicide near the shoulder of the freeway. Thome had stopped by to check on their progress and discuss an upcoming job.

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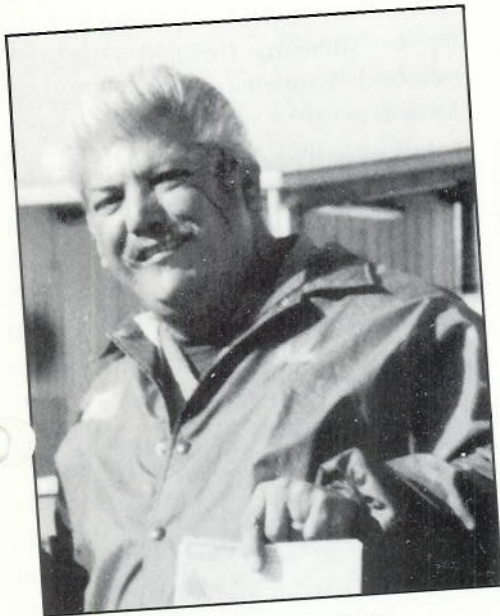


# Fatality

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For reasons not immediately known, a big rig went out of control and slammed into the Caltrans trucks, causing a fire and a noxious cloud of smoke.

The driver of the big rig, a 24-year-old man from High Grove, Calif., was slightly injured in the crash. The California Highway Patrol was investigating the crash to determine if any charges would be filed against the driver.



**JUAN THOME**

A citizen who witnessed the accident was praised for rushing to the assistance of the fallen workers.

"I was heading westbound on the 60 and I was looking the other way when all of a sudden, bang!" Lenny Lampasona, 47, of Rowland Heights, told a reporter. "Then I saw flames flying."

Lampasona parked his one-ton truck in the emergency lane, grabbed a fire extinguisher, jumped over the freeway's center divider and attended to the victims.

Thome was flown to Los Angeles County-Harbor-UCLA Medical Center in Torrance, where he was pro-

nounced dead of massive injuries. Garcia was flown to Martin Luther King Jr. Hospital in Los Angeles. He suffered several broken bones, cuts and bruises. Aguilera also suffered cuts and bruises and breathing difficulties because of smoke inhalation. She was treated and released from the hospital.

The crash sent an icy chill through the Caltrans family of field employees, who know that road work can be a life-or-death proposition.

"It staggers everyone," said Vince Moreno, one of Thome's co-workers. "It makes you think about what you do for a living. It takes away a lot of your pride knowing that some of the people that you know were excellent employees are now injured or gone."

Moreno also echoed the sentiments of many Caltrans employees when he described Thome as an exemplary worker.

"He was a very nice man and a very dedicated employee," Moreno said. "He was an individual who, through a method of organization, set a good example to the rest of the employees who worked with him."

Another co-worker, Larry Ornay, said: "Juan was a really nice guy. You couldn't ask for a nicer guy. You couldn't ask for a harder worker."

The crash came on California Workers' Memorial Day. At ceremonies held in Sacramento just hours after the accident, the names of Jerry Alcala and Callie "Joel" Buser were added to a memorial plaque located in the lobby of the Caltrans Headquarters building.

Family members of Alcala and Buser were in attendance at the ceremony. The plaque was first dedicated in October of 1991. It honors the 135 employees who have lost their lives in the line of duty since the state agency's formation in 1895.

At a memorial service for Thome held May 3 at Saint Martha Catholic Church in La Puente, Caltrans Director James W. van Loben Sels expressed deep sorrow over the tragedy

and reaffirmed the department's commitment to safety.

"Caltrans and the Agency are part of an extended family — a family that pulls together in times of trouble and hurt," van Loben Sels said. "And when one part of that family is lost, we all are diminished."

"To the family and friends of Juan Thome, we say: We share in your grief. And we stand together in redoubling our effort never to let this happen again."

Thome was buried in his orange Caltrans shirt, a testament to his love

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**—James van Loben Sels**

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of his job.

Noting the memorial to Caltrans workers in Sacramento, van Loben Sels said: "135 bronze plaques shine out on an ebony background. Eventually, Juan's name will become the 136th. From this day forward, we dedicate ourselves to ensuring that a 137th plate is never added."

Thome had been with Caltrans for 13 years. He is survived by his wife, Christine, a son, Dominic, and a granddaughter, Ashley. ⑦

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A fund has been established to assist the family of Juan Thome. Make checks payable to the California Transportation Foundation, c/o The Juan Thome Fund, P.O. Box 163453, Sacramento, Ca. 95816.