

## 'IT'S A DANGEROUS, DANGEROUS STRETCH'

High number of wrecks on eastbound approach to I-10 bridge prompts one official to call it 'devil's triangle of interstates'

BY TERRY L. JONES

PORT ALLEN - March 29 started out as a day brimming with hope for the Huggins family as they continued the next leg of their three-day journey from California to Florida, where dad Jeremiah Huggins had accepted a new job.

But as they approached the Interstate 10 bridge across the Mississippi River about 5 p.m. - a time when Baton Rouge's notorious rush-hour traffic congestion tends to be at its worst - the day turned tragic.

Jeremiah Huggins, who was behind the wheel of a moving truck carrying their belongings, was killed and his 9-year-old daughter, Evelyn Huggins, was injured after traffic approaching the bridge came to a screeching halt and he was unable to stop in time, slamming into the back of a semi-truck in front of him.

His wife was following the moving truck in the couple's Suburban with their other two daughters and the family's three dogs. She watched in horror as the moving truck and their boxedup possessions were reduced to a pile of twisted metal, glass shards and debris.

"Traffic stopped; time just froze," said Erin Huggins, Jeremiah Huggins' wife of 10 1/2 years. The horrific scene played out within a 2-mile stretch of I-10 between La. 415 and the new Mississippi River bridge in Port Allen.

Lt. Ken Albarez, traffic commander for the West Baton Rouge Parish Sheriff's Office, calls the corridor "the devil's triangle of interstates" as the frequency of crashes like Jeremiah Huggins' increases, in part, to daily traffic congestion along the Mississippi River bridge.

"It's a dangerous, dangerous stretch," he said. "You're not anticipating (traffic) coming to a stop coming in from Lafayette."

According to crash data provided to The Advocate by the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development, there were 235 crashes within the 2-mile corridor between Jan. 1, 2015, and April 11, 2018.

A majority, 169 to be exact, were rear-end collisions, the crash data

show. Forty-four of the crashes occurred because of side swiping.

Rodney Mallet, a DOTD spokesman, stopped short of calling the 2-mile corridor dangerous, but he acknowledged that the number of crashes along the stretch is an anomaly for the I-10 system.

"Typically, we don't see this high of a number of rear-enders on the interstate," he said. "However, because of the nature of the interstate in this area, it backs up often during peak hours, and therefore, there is more opportunity for rear-ended crashes."

A 5-year-old boy was killed along the same corridor six months before Jeremiah Huggins' crash when an 18-wheeler failed to stop for a traffic pileup and plowed into three vehicles, one of which contained the child and his parents.

The driver of the 18-wheeler was booked on one count of negligent homicide.

"The government officials need to fix this dangerous spot," Erin Huggins said. "I heard they call it a dead man's triangle. Really? That's saying something."

Huggins said her husband was in the right lane on I-10 East behind two semi-trucks. She said they were both traveling approximately 65 mph - the speed limit along the 2-mile stretch is 60 mph - when the flow of traffic just came to an abrupt stop.

"My Jeremiah immediately slammed on his brakes and swerved to the right; however, he did not make enough of a right to pass in enough time," she said. "I immediately swerved to the right and slammed on my brakes in the nick of time, not hitting them."

Huggins said her husband, who was 39, shielded their daughter during the crash, which likely saved her life.

When she approached the wreckage, Huggins found her daughter tangled up in her dad's limp arms. The 9-yearold's chin, left arm and two left fingers were badly bruised, she said. She also had a few cuts on her left cheekbone from broken glass.

"I don't want anyone to say she walked away fine because she didn't," Huggins said, referencing the emotional pain her daughters are struggling with in the wake of their father's death. "The entire engine was gone. Half of the door and top of the cab area where they were sitting was gone. I tried to reach for him, but people were pulling me away from the truck while I screamed, 'Stay with me, Jay."

Stay with me.' " Jay was the nickname used for her husband.

Huggins said there were no signs of traffic stopping. She doesn't remember seeing the semi-trucks' brake lights flash or any hazardous lights or warning signs alerting drivers to a possible backup.

However, there are two signs along the I-10 stretch approaching the bridge that read "Be Prepared To Stop."

Mallet said the high number of crashes, especially rear-end ones, keep happening because too many drivers are distracted and not paying attention to the various safety measures the state has installed to try to cut down on the crashes.

DOTD has installed signs and flashing lights in five spots within a 5-mile radius of the Mississippi River bridge, rumble strips and cable barriers along the median, and it has partnered with Waze, a mobile app that provides realtime road conditions to its users, Mallet said.

"We can't engineer for all driver behavior," he said. "Even with all the improvements in place, the key to reducing crashes is for drivers to pay attention, be prepared to stop and not drive distracted."

Traffic backups occur regularly when traffic gets choked up near the I-10 and La. 1 interchange and where traffic coming off the Mississippi River bridge has to merge with oncoming traffic from I-110 South from Baton Rouge.

The I-110 and I-10 interchange has been an aggravating chokepoint for years. Two lanes coming off the bridge are essentially forced into one lane that must merge with oncoming traffic along I-110 because the second lane along I-10 East becomes an exit lane for Washington Street.

The La. 1 and I-10 intersection on the west bank of the river is another problem spot in the area. Two lanes of traffic from La. 1 must squeeze into the oncoming traffic from I-10 East.

According to 2016 daily traffic counts from DOTD, more than 50,000 vehicles travel La. 1 near the Mississippi River bridge; more than 75,000 traverse the 2-mile stretch between La. 415 and the bridge; and approximately 100,000 cars cross the I-10 Mississippi River bridge every day.

Mallet said a proposed expansion project under development at DOTD

could relieve some of the congestion along I-10 in Port Allen.

"The project calls for an additional lane on I-10 between La. 415 and La. 1," he said. "Once constructed, eastbound traffic exiting La. 1 could move to the far right lane and therefore help reduce the queue of traffic waiting to cross the bridge."

The same project, Mallet said, also calls for an additional lane on I-10 in each direction from the east foot of the bridge to the I-10 and I-12 junction, more commonly known as "the split."

That improvement will provide two through lanes on eastbound I-10 coming off the Mississippi River bridge rather than the current one through lane. The project is in the environmental stage, Mallet said.

Alvarez, of the West Baton Rouge Parish Sheriff's Office, offers up a cheap solution in the interim. He said the state should consider closing off a lane of I-110 South near the I-10 intersection during certain times of the day, reducing traffic out of downtown Baton Rouge down to one lane and giving drivers coming off the new bridge a little more wiggle room to merge and keep traffic flowing more smoothly.

"They could do that immediately," he said.

Mallet said DOTD already has looked into that option but determined it would just cause a traffic pileup extending north of the Baton Rouge Metropolitan Airport along I-110.

"As much as people want to find an easy road-related solution, the key factor in the majority of these accidents is driver behavior," Mallet said.