

## **Reckless car thief leaves Surrey family for dead:**

**Mary Bajwa and her children paid the bills the only way they could -- by working several jobs. Then a joyrider smashed into them, leaving the kids in a coma. Peter Clough writes about a family that wonders if their assailant will ever learn.**

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"Until you guys have been through what he's been through and lived a full Surrey life, you guys have no right to say anything about my boyfriend. He's a gentle man. He's the sweetest man in the world."

The young woman, identified only as Michelle, spoke angrily to reporters following a court appearance by her boyfriend Michael Plante on charges of car theft and dangerous driving.

Four months later, in July 2004, Michael Plante -- who grew up in a variety of Vancouver and Surrey foster homes -- was sentenced to four years in jail for causing a horrific accident from behind the wheel of a freshly stolen truck. The 19-year-old, one of four car thieves in a deadly convoy, ran from the scene of the tragedy, leaving three members of the Bajwa family trapped in their vehicle and struggling for life.

The girlfriend's reprimand sparked a flurry of furious letters to the editor.

What exactly did she mean by a "full Surrey life"? Even so, is a deprived childhood any excuse for such mindless behaviour? Most important, can anything be done to stop people like Michael Plante and his circle of friends from casually stealing cars to go joyriding with such utter disregard for other people's safety?

At her home in a trailer park off the King George Highway, Mary Bajwa has her hands full dealing with her own family's "full Surrey life" right now. She is not overly concerned with the details of how Michael Plante matured into a callous young criminal who almost killed her and her two grown children Sarah, then 18, and Trevor, 24.

The Bajwas are back on their feet -- just about. Between medical appointments, psychological counseling, lawyers' meetings and insurance wranglings, they have had neither the time nor the inclination to watch the short video that Plante has made by way of an apology.

"We could see it if we want to," says Mary, a single mom. "We were told that he cries a lot in it. I don't think he really knows what he's done to my family."

"He's never said sorry face to face," adds Sarah, lucky to be alive following the crash that left her in a coma for two months.

Feb. 17, 2004 was a typical day in the Bajwas' crazy routine of part-time and full-time jobs, their way of paying the bills. Sarah was working three jobs as well as babysitting and trying to finish grade 12. That day Mom had already put in a shift at the bakery and in the evening she and Sarah were due to put in five hours with a cleaning franchise in Langley. Tyler, 14, stayed at home to do his homework but Trevor, staying with his mom between jobs, decided to go along to keep them company.

Mary had to be up the next morning for her bakery job so they left home for work, earlier than usual, right after supper. Mary looked forward to having an hour to herself at home later. They drove through the rain along King George Highway toward 88th Avenue, where Mary would turn left.

Not far away, Michael Plante was riding in one of three vehicles he and his cohorts had stolen that day. The 19-year-old had been raised by foster families since the age of two when he was taken from his mother because she was too disabled to give him proper care. He had never known a father. As a young adult, he'd already had numerous run-ins with the law.

He was facing **auto theft** charges and was on the run from the cops that miserable February evening as the group pulled into a parking lot at 78th Avenue and 120th Street. Michael wanted wheels of his own.

He chose a Dodge Ram turbo pickup truck. The convoy of four vehicles -- the youngest driver was 13 -- headed out through the streets of Surrey and up the King George, Plante holding up the rear. Some motorists pulled over to get out of their way. At 88th, the driver who'd never had a licence saw the light change to yellow.

There was no way he was going to get left behind.

A court heard later that Plante reached a speed of between 95 and 113 km/h before the light changed to red and he realized he was going to hit the small Ford Tempo carrying the Bajwas. His estimated speed of impact was put at 76 km/h -- enough to propel the Bajwa family 40 metres.

The three of them lay bleeding and unconscious in the wreckage.

Michael Plante decided not to help. Instead, he ran to his biological mother's home and eventually told a handful of friends and relatives what had happened. As he considered their advice to turn himself in, his uncle picked up *The Province* and looked at the photo of a jacket that had been left at the scene. He recognized it as Michael's and called the cops.

Mary Bajwa sustained multiple injuries, including broken ribs and a lacerated liver, but was the first to regain consciousness. Neither Trevor nor Sarah, both in comas and suffering extensive injuries, were expected to survive.

Their condition was kept from Mary until she was strong enough to deal with the news and be moved into the same hospital. "That was the first thing I did, was go see them in ICU," she recalls. "They had so many tubes and wires hooked up to them. They were both in a coma. All you could do was just talk to them and hold their hands."

Within two months, Trevor had regained consciousness and, shortly afterwards, Sarah too came back to begin the gruelling road to recovery.

The first problem facing Mary was finding a new place to rent. Their basement suite was a nightmare for one wheelchair, let alone two or three. The insurance claim allowed for twice-weekly cleaning help and taxis to and from the hospital. It eased the burden somewhat that Trevor, unable to walk for months,

moved in with his dad. Tyler, 14 and lucky enough to have stayed home that night, found himself the only able-bodied member of the family.

"He was quite amazing," says Mary. "He did a lot of stuff. ICBC, because he wasn't in the vehicle, won't cover him (for counselling) but he's still been affected by it."

All three occupants of the car have been left with short-term memory loss which, says Mary, has contributed to a whole new set of emotions and family dynamics. She says she and her children have been left with a lot of bottled-up feelings.

"The anger is directed toward Michael but with all three of us living in the same home you always take it out on the one nearest to you -- and that's basically what we do," she says. "We're close but not like we were before the accident. It's just like we're getting to know each other all over again."

None of them have been able to work since the accident and Mary says the ICBC compensation will run out next February. Sarah has endured 10 operations, mostly attempts to correct a hole in her bladder. She has tubes leading from her kidneys and says the procedure for replacing them is extremely painful.

"They've tried it so many times now and it hasn't worked," says Sarah, who was due for another operation this fall. Only when they fix it will the once-promising athlete be able to think about finally finishing grade 12 and starting a career.

"With our calendar, we're lucky if we get one day a week where we're not going to appointments," adds Mary. "It's been like that since the accident."

At the trial, the Bajwas heard Michael Plante's claim that he'd suffered abuse in some of his foster placements. He had been diagnosed with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder and had used crystal meth for five years prior to the accident. Nevertheless, the judge spoke hopefully of rehabilitation and pointed out that he'd been working hard on his high school equivalency while in custody.

"All I want to say is that I'm sorry to the Bajwa family," Plante told the court.

As he was led away, Mary Bajwa confronted him. "Say it to my face."

"You guys know I'm sorry," said Plante. "I pray for you guys every night. I hope someday you forgive me."

Mary says she spent a long time in court just looking at Plante and wondering. "I just wanted to look at the person who could do what he did to us and then go over to the car and basically leave us for dead -- and run," she says.

The last-minute apology meant nothing to her. She describes it as a smart move by a man who's learned how to work the legal system.

She believes that had Michael Plante been sent to boot camp when he was younger, her own family might have been spared this ordeal.

She's at a loss to understand why his young age appeared to be a factor in what she sees as a lenient sentence. Plante had already spent a year in custody when he entered his guilty plea. His sentence from that day was two years.

Mary says she suspects Michael Plante will be out long before that. She is not optimistic that his time in jail, completing rehabilitation programs, will cure him from stealing cars.

"They've got to get hard," says Mary. "They've got to get tough or they're not going to learn."

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