# Paralysis of Road Rage Victim Sparks a Cry for Anti Road Rage Legislation

**By David Block**

Imagine, with just the blink of an eye, or in a split second, you can go from being fully able bodied to disabled and remain that way for the rest of your life. Twenty-year-old Jessica Rogers of Hamilton, NJ knows this firsthand; because on the rainy night of March 23, 2005, she was in a car accident, which paralyzed her from the chest down. At the time, Rogers was 16 years old and a junior in high school.

Jessica Rogers of Hamilton, New Jersey was a rebellious teenager. Like many teenagers, her pressing issues were where to where to meet her friends, which party to go to, and who might show up to watch her cheerlead. Then in a split second on the evening of March 23, 2005, Rogers, age 16 at the time, was in a car accident which left her paralyzed from the chest down. From that moment forward, her issues, worries and concerns changed drastically.

Before the accident, Rogers remembered: "I was bad. I didn't care about anyone but myself. I hated being home. All I wanted was to be out with my friends." She was a C and D student and never cracked a book. Now, what could have ended her life, may have left her a quadriplegic, but ultimately expanded her heart and her desire to learn, grow and help others.

That rainy evening of the accident started out as a fun night. Rogers was in the backseat with her boyfriend Shaun, his 19-year-old brother Daniel Robbins, Jr. was driving and his girlfriend Melissa Fuller was in the front passenger seat. As Robbins drove, another motorist cut in front of him.

The enraged Robbins chased the driver while the two girls screamed: "Slow down! Don't kill us!" But Robbins ignored them. He barreled down the shoulder of the Mercer County Road at twice the 30 M.P.H. speed limit. He lost control of the car and struck a telephone pole.

He was uninjured and his younger brother sustained minor ones. However, the girls fared worse: Fuller suffered a broken jaw, pelvis and hand and lost some teeth; Rogers sustained a broken neck, an injured spinal cord and partially paralyzed lungs.

Rogers spent the next three months at two Philadelphia hospitals, Thomas Jefferson University Hospital and Magee Rehabilitation Hospital.

Surgeons replaced Rogers' c5 vertebrate with a cadaver bone and performed a metal fusion of her c4-7 vertebrate using one plate two rods and seven screws.

The pain she experienced after the accident was excruciating.

When she transferred to Magee and began rehab, she grew confident that she could adjust. Her uncle was a paraplegic.

"I still never thought that it could happen to me," Rogers said.

Support from family and friends helped her adjust to becoming quadriplegic. Her father Scott Rogers also credits Shriners Hospital.

"Without the help at Shriners Hospital, giving Jessica numerous surgeries at no charge, she wouldn't be able to use her hands to grip soda bottles, or to write," her father said.

When she came home, July 2005, her family installed home modifications in order for her to use her wheelchair. "Some of my friends made sure I wasn't by myself. They tried to make me happy." But not all of her friends stood by her.

"When I went back to school (September 2005), a lot of people that I used to talk to on a day to day basis, walked passed me and acted like they didn't know me. They were scared. I lost a lot of friends. That just goes to show who your true friends are."

Her days of cutting class were over. "I couldn't because I now had an aide with me all the time; taking notes for me." The bright side was that she now earned A(s) and B(s). Yet being in school was quite difficult. "Because I was physically disabled, had physical therapy and doctors' appointments every other day, I only went to school half days. I missed a lot of school. It would have taken me two years to finish school instead of one year. I dropped out and got my GED."

Besides the continued physical therapy and doctors' appointments, she found herself becoming physically ill more frequently than before. Due to her partially paralyzed lungs, she now gets Pneumonia once a year. Her last bout was October 2008, which landed her in the hospital for 23 days.

Despite this adversity, she had become a role model and an advocate for anti road rage legislation. This happened unexpectedly when Daniel Robbins, Jr. went on trial in the fall 2006.

She remembered: "In court he said that he will not apologize for the way that he was driving, but he will apologize for our injuries. He said, 'teenagers drive that way to prove who they are.'" She added that the key reason that she and her family have nothing to do with him is before they received the police report, he told her parents that the accident happened because he hit a telephone pole, not mentioning the chase that preceded it. However, the police report stated that the accident was due to his dangerous car chase. "He lied to my parents," said Jessica.

Robbins was found guilty by auto assault in the fourth degree, which meant no jail time.

"Afterwards, Scott Rogers spoke to me,' said New Jersey State Senator Bill Baroni, who at the time was an Assemblyman. "He was upset that this kid was going to walk free. I told him (Scott Rogers) to get a petition started." He followed Baroni's advice and attained 1,500 signatures. As a result, Robbins received a six month jail sentence, but only served half of it. He was released May 2007.

Angered over the light sentence, Scott Rogers spoke with Baroni and Assemblywoman Linda R. Greenstein (D., Mercer), Chair of the Judiciary Committee about passing anti road rage legislation.

We talked about coming up with legislation," said Greenstein, "to make sure that drivers like that get properly punished." She said that the bill, The Jessica Rogers Law, would keep others from becoming road rage casualties.

(Various journalists named the bill, "Jessica's Law, but State Senator Baroni emphasized that the proper name is the Jessica Rogers Law.) "The law would prevent people from being in the same situation that Jessica was in," said Greenstein.

Baroni said that under the Jessica Rogers Law, road rage: "requires two or more actions committed simultaneously or in immediate succession." Road rage acts include excessive speeding, following a vehicle too closely, erratic lane changes, overtaking another vehicle, failure to yield the right of way and verbal threats.

Punishments facing drivers who commit road rage would include, stiff fines, incarceration, suspended licenses, and they would have to attend anger management classes.

Both Baroni and Greenstein cosponsored The Jessica Rogers Law.

According to Scott Rogers, in November 2007, the Judiciary Committee, Chaired by Linda Greenstein, unanimously passed the bill. However, the exuberance of joy was short lived. Scott Rogers explained that in 2008 a new judiciary committee formed. "One of the voters suddenly feared that too many people not having road rage could be lumped with people who have road rage," said Scott Rogers.

"It did not pass the legislature yet," said Baroni. "That's something we need to continue to work on. New Jersey is the mostly dense packed state in the union. We have a lot of cars, a lot of traffic. We want to make sure that that people can drive on our New Jersey turnpike, and our roads safely and not be victims of road rage."

Should the bill pass through the Legislature and then the senate, the next step would be for it to go national. "Jessica is an amazing young woman," said Baroni. "It is my job as a legislator to fight like hell for my constituents and she's right. Her family is right! I'm in a position as a legislator to do something to help the Rogers Family."

Meanwhile, Jessica plans to attend Mercer County Community College.

She currently volunteers her time as a peer counselor at Magee Rehab. "I talk to people with spinal cord injuries, whose injuries are similar to mine. I tell them life goes on and I'm living proof."

To learn more about Jessica Rogers, log onto www.jessicalynnrogers.com