

Grieving parents cite dangers with popular church vans: Van Angels retrofitting 15-passenger vehicles

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Mark Smith often contemplates what his daughter, Malori, would be doing now if she hadn't been killed on a church mission trip to Mexico two years ago, six weeks after her high school graduation. "You can't help wondering," Smith said by phone from his Denver home.

Smith hopes that through a new nonprofit project, Van Angels, no other parents ever experience having a child killed while riding in a 15-passenger vehicle. The vehicles are often called "church vans" because of their popularity with church groups and because fatal accidents involved church groups grab headlines.

Malori was one of three people killed when the church van they were riding in crashed near Monterrey, Mexico, following the separation of a virtually new left-rear tire. The others killed were Bethany Bosarge, 16, of Peachtree, Georgia, and Jonathan Lomeli, 23, of Laredo, Texas. Several others were seriously injured.

Devastated at the loss of his oldest child, Smith and his wife, Cindy, decided not to sit by while others needlessly died—others such as ten-year-old Jesse Brooks of Albertville, Alabama, killed coming home from a mission trip to Wyoming the same month as the Smiths' daughter.

After settling a class-action lawsuit against Ford and Michelin in 2002, the Smiths and the other families involved in the Mexico accident decided to set aside part of the undisclosed settlement to help churches and schools retrofit their 15-passenger vans by adding two rear tires.

"Each family decided what it wanted to contribute," said Smith, director of Van Angels. "After a few days of news, we asked ourselves, 'What can we do to prevent more accidents?' We came up with the idea of Van Angels to create educational

awareness about issues relating to 15-passenger vans.” Smith said that adding two rear tires will prevent most vans from rolling over during an accident.

After the settlement, Ford spokeswoman Kathleen Vokes blamed the accident that killed Smith’s daughter and two others on a faulty tire on the E350 Econoline van, according to the Associated Press. “Our condolences go out to those involved, but this accident was caused by tread separation,” Vokes said then. “Under the circumstances of this accident, any van, pickup or sport utility vehicle would have rolled over.”

Smith, who said he was unaware of van safety problems before his daughter was killed, maintained that the weight being carried by the van caused the new tire to separate.

“Vans were designed as cargo vans and never intended for passengers,” he said. “Most of the weight is on the left rear tire, which causes it to separate.”

Van Angels hired an expert to test a van using dual tires, who demonstrated that it would not roll, Smith said. He said Ford vans sold in Europe are required to have dual-rear-wheel systems, so the technology to make the vehicles safer is already in place.

In May the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration issued a third cautionary warning of rollover risk under certain conditions to users of 15-passenger vans. The first two warnings were issued in 2001 and 2002. NHTSA said 763 people were killed and 1,469 “incapacitatingly injured” in rollovers between 1982 and 2001. The federal government prohibits public elementary and secondary schools from transporting students in 15-passenger vans.

Jeff Wigington, a Texas lawyer who represented the church plaintiffs and who specializes in product defects, called the third government advisory “unprecedented.” Reached by phone at his Corpus Christi office, he said he was “not aware of the federal government ever taking this type of action on any other vehicle, including the Ford Pinto. It just shows the seriousness of the problem, and it’s not getting any better.”

Wigington said some members of Congress, including Republican Senators John McCain of Arizona and Olympia Snow of Maine, want to make van manufacturers recall or redesign their vehicles. A 15-passenger van accident last year that killed 12

people in Maine spurred Snow's interest, said Wigington, who is representing families of the Maine group in litigation. He said his firm also represents "about a half-dozen" groups involved in church van crashes.

The biggest obstacle Van Angels is encountering is finding companies capable of adding the dual-rear-wheel system. "We thought we could find some people fairly easy to retrofit the vans," said Smith, adding that he knows of only three places that do the work.

The first Angel Van fitted with the dual wheels was picked up in mid-June by Smith's brother, Scott Smith, a pastor at Trinity Christian Fellowship Church in Chandler, Arizona. Van Angels covered the cost of about \$2,100, which included four new tires, plus a spare, an adapter kit and the fenders to cover the tires.

"I really could not tell a difference in the way it handled," Scott Smith said. "I've just driven it from the shop to the church, but it seems to run really well."

The pastor said his church used its van for all trips, in town and out, until his niece was killed. "We started using it less and less," he said. "It made us very nervous to carry kids in it." -Yvonne Betowt, *Religion News Service*