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A year ago, a hit-and-run driver killed Carmen and Bob Pack's two young children. today, the couple finds strength in their friends, family, and faith.

By Darcy Brown-Martin / Photograph by Lenny Gonzalez



Bob and Carmen Pack live in a handsome stucco home in one of the many developments that border Danville's busy Camino Tassajara. To travel anywhere outside of their neighborhood, the Packs must drive down the smooth four-lane road, where the posted speed limit is 45 miles per hour but where traffic routinely whisks along a bit faster.

Every time they make this drive, the Packs pass a spot, just blocks from their home, where a few dusty stuffed animals sit among some faded plastic plants, and a typed letter flutters from a black electrical box. These are all that remain of what was once a spontaneous memorial covering 12 feet of the grassy roadside.

Carmen passes the remnants of the shrine every time she drives to Sycamore Valley Elementary School, where she volunteers in the library. Bob passes it when he heads to San Francisco to appear on local television, where in the past 12 months he has repeatedly discussed his campaign to strengthen California's DUI laws. The couple passes the site together when they head to the offices of the fertility specialists they've been consulting, and when they make their regular pilgrimage to the Queen of Heaven Cemetery in Lafayette, where they buried their two children last fall.

"In the beginning, I used to cry every time I drove by there," Carmen says. "It's a constant, sad reminder—but if there were nothing there, I think I would feel worse."

The faded shrine on the sidewalk of Camino Tassajara marks the site where Carmen and Bob's kids, 10-year-old Troy and 7-year-old Alana, were killed one year ago in a horrific hit-and-run accident. The memorial, like their grief, isn't gone; but it has changed with time. In the face of such a cataclysmic family tragedy, the Packs could easily have entered a state of paralysis and permanent

mourning. With a combination of civic commitment and religious faith—and with the support of family, friends, and hundreds of strangers—they are moving forward.

And as the anniversary of their children's deaths nears, the Packs are proving that there can be life, filled with memories but still fully lived, after a devastating loss.

For years, Bob and Carmen's lives unfolded with a sort of ordinary joy. The pair met by chance at a restaurant in Palo Alto in 1986. Carmen, a former model and beauty pageant queen with waves of dark hair and a wide, brilliant smile, was 26. She had recently come to the United States from Lima, Peru, to visit her best friend. Bob was 30 and working in high tech. Athletic and soft-spoken, he almost could have been mistaken for Carmen's brother. As he passed her table on his way in and out of a business function at the back of the dining room, the two noticed one another. Though Carmen spoke little English at the time, they managed to strike up a conversation. Both came away smitten.

"When I met Bob," Carmen says now in her lilting English, "I knew I wasn't going back to Peru." For his part, Bob says that as their first conversation gave way to daily dates and many more hours of talk, he was taken by Carmen's clear sincerity, the importance she placed on her Catholic faith, and her descriptions of growing up in a close-knit family with five siblings. He felt that her life paralleled his own, growing up in a Catholic family with five kids in San Jose. The couple married in 1988, and rented a house in Saratoga. Troy Robert was born in 1993 and Alana Corinne followed in 1996. By 1997, the Packs were looking for a place where they could buy a home and raise their kids.

Bob's oldest sister, Marjie Lynch—who, like her brother and sister-in-law, lives just off Camino Tassajara—led them to Danville. And like her, they loved it. It was small-town America, with good schools and open spaces. It was peaceful, and it felt safe.

As Troy and Alana grew, the Packs became part of the community through their children. Troy played baseball, football, and soccer, and he joined a swim team. For all his athletic ability, this young A's fan had a shy, sweet quality. Alana was a dark-eyed beauty like her mother. Like her brother, Alana swam and played baseball and soccer, and she took tennis lessons and was a Brownie, as well. She, too, was reserved with people other than her own family and best friends, but Alana was also spunky and determined. Neighbors called her the "brown squirrel," as she scurried from one event to the other. Both children excelled in their classes at Sycamore Valley Elementary.

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Carmen had worked as a Spanish-speaking customer-relations representative for AT&T when she and Bob first married, but she quit working when Troy was born. Her life revolved around the kids: school and summer camp pickups and drop-offs, confirmation classes, team meetings, weekend games. Bob left high tech for other interests after co-founding and serving as vice president of sales for the Internet service provider NetZero. But he was always involved in the kids' pursuits, coaching their teams and attending their games.



Even without sports, the Packs were close-knit. Their large home was “the clubhouse of the neighborhood,” Carmen says. “It made my kids happy, and that was the way I liked it.” The Packs almost never went out without their children. “My husband and I used to make fun of them because they were so doting,” says Lynch. “They never had a babysitter unless it was my mom.”

“We had fun with the kids,” Bob says quietly. “We just wanted to be with them.” And, Carmen adds, “I’m very glad we did that, because I didn’t know that they would have such short lives.”

At 6:30 on the evening of Sunday, October 26, 2003, Carmen strolled behind as Troy on his scooter and Alana on her bike rode along Camino Tassajara’s sidewalk with two of their best friends. Daylight saving time had ended that morning, and dusk had already descended, but this did not dampen the kids’ spirits. The weather was hot, Halloween was just five days away, and the youngsters had spent the afternoon in costume—Alana looking feisty and somewhat grown-up as an elegant witch, Troy in the football uniform he was so proud of—playing at the annual block party held in the Packs’ development. After the party, the kids had changed clothes and eaten dinner before setting out with Carmen to buy a slushy drink. At home, Bob had finished cleaning up after the family’s barbeque, and was watching television.

As Carmen and the children moved down Camino Tassajara, a gold Mercedes driven by a 45-year-old woman named Jimena Barreto came up the road in their

direction. Barreto passed through the intersection with Crow Canyon Road, then drifted to the right for a short distance before bumping up over Camino Tassajara's curb.

As her car drove some 80 feet down the sidewalk, it ran over the foot of Troy's best friend, Hunter, then struck Troy and Alana full on. Alana was thrown onto the grass along the sidewalk. Troy was hurled onto the roof of the car, then rolled off further down the sidewalk when the car came to a halt. He landed some 40 feet away from Alana and behind Carmen. Troy's scooter had flown into the air, striking Carmen as it landed, damaging ligaments in her knee. Hunter's younger sister, McKenna, who had been riding a few feet behind the other children, was untouched.

Danville residents Teresa and Arnold Cunha—strangers to the Packs—had been driving warily behind the Mercedes as it made its way down Camino Tassajara; they pulled over immediately after witnessing the accident. Carmen blurted out to them her home phone number, and the couple, having already called 911, used their cell phone to call Bob.

"Carmen got on the phone and screamed to me the kids had been hit by a car," Bob says. "I dropped the phone and rushed out of the house wearing just socks on my feet. I raced down there. It was probably less than a minute between the time I got the call and when I got to the scene. It's just a half-mile from our house. I got there before the police and the fire department. I ran to Carmen first, and she told me she was OK. Then I tried to revive both my kids. I was crawling back and forth between them on my knees, trying to give them mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. We actually got Troy's heart going again [temporarily]. But when we tried to revive Alana, it was clear that it was hopeless."

In the chaos, Carmen realized that Barreto, who had gotten out of her car and was becoming hysterical, was going to try to flee. "She was repeating over and over that she didn't want to go to jail," Carmen says. "At one point, she told me she was going to go for some water, so I limped over to her car and pulled the keys from the ignition."

Alana suffered multiple traumas and died at the scene. Troy was taken to San Ramon Regional Medical Center, where doctors managed to restart his heart a second time. He was then airlifted to Oakland Children's Hospital and Research Center. In that time, he never regained consciousness, and at around 11 that night, he, too, was pronounced dead.

Barreto, meanwhile, had managed to flee the confusion of the scene by flagging

down an unsuspecting driver. By late that night, she made it to San Francisco, according to police, and was doing her best to disappear.

Bob and Carmen returned home from Oakland Children's Hospital with several members of his family early Monday morning. After a few hours of broken sleep, they arose to confront the tragedy that had engulfed their lives. While his sister walked through the warm, sunlit development, going door-to-door in her sweat suit to tell neighbors what had happened, Bob was at home, alternately sobbing and calling friends to tell them the news.

As the day wore on, Bob's grief became overwhelming, and he became convinced that he and Carmen should kill themselves. "We were so close to our children," he says slowly. "I just felt I did not want to go on."

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Carmen spent that first day in the family room, her bandaged leg stretched out before her and a cluster of women seated around her.

“Because I was having difficulty walking, they had made up the couch as a bed for me, and I just lay there,” she says. “I knew a lot of people were coming in. I could hear voices, people telling me to eat, to rest. But I couldn’t eat, couldn’t talk. My leg hurt, and I was praying, praying, praying. I wasn’t aware of time going



by. I was telling God to take care of my babies until I can see them again. I was thanking Him for not taking just one, but taking the two together. My kids could not be apart from each other; they loved each other too much.”

Her head down, injured leg elevated, Carmen hardly spoke from early Monday morning until late that night—some 16 hours, by Marjie Lynch’s accounting.

After a few more hours’ fitful sleep, though, Carmen woke Tuesday morning talking and responding, says Lynch. “We asked, ‘Why were you like that yesterday?’ And she said, ‘I prayed all day, and asked God why He would do this. And He said to me, “Don’t cry for your children; they’re My angels now.”’ And she said, ‘It’s going to be OK.’”

Although she is a warm and empathetic person, Carmen didn’t have many friends in Danville before the accident.

“I liked to be with my kids, so I didn’t have much time to go out,” she says. With the exception of her youngest sister, Lourdes, who moved to San Ramon in 1998, Carmen’s family lives in Peru.

Bob, on the other hand, had an extensive network of family and friends. Following the accident, Carmen’s sister and Bob’s family and former USC fraternity brothers and others came from all over the state, crowding into the Pack house and sleeping on the floor by Carmen and Bob’s bed.

The Danville community at large—hundreds of people the Packs had never even met—also swept in to support them. It was as if people were compelled by the

sheer horror of it: two children, bright and attractive, killed within yards of their mother on a main thoroughfare traveled by hundreds of kids and families every day. Almost immediately, a shrine began forming at the accident site. When the pile of flowers, notes, balloons, teddy bears, and pumpkins threatened to topple under its own weight, a fencing company erected a swath of chain link to support the offerings. Just before the rains came, someone raised a small canopy.

Gifts, too, rained down on the Packs' front doorstep. "It was amazing," Carmen says. "Every time I opened my door, there were books about grieving, or about a lost child. There was a Bible. Flowers, cards. Gift certificates for pedicures, massages, gym memberships. I had meals left for us every single day. And it helped. I was so down. I felt I had lost my life. But to see that a lot of people cared about me—that was very special."

Certainly the outpouring of sympathy and support from family, friends, and strangers was instrumental in sustaining the Packs. Bob and Carmen's unmistakable love for each other also gave them strength. But friends say one thing has been tantamount in carrying Bob and Carmen through their worst moments—Carmen's faith.

Teresa Cunha has seen the effects first-hand. Since she and her husband witnessed the accident, she has become close to the Packs. "In listening to and watching Carmen, it's very clear that she draws strength from something more than earthly ties," Cunha says. "I have never seen anyone as strong as she is. It's helped me renew my own faith."

Carmen's explanation is both simple and profound. She still has nightmares about the accident, still hears the sound the Mercedes made hitting her children. But, she says, "I absolutely believe my children are in a better place. That helps me. Believing that, I have peace in me."

Bob's family credits Carmen's faith with saving his life. Two days after the accident, when the couple were alone in their second-floor bedroom, Bob opened up. Besieged by pain and guilt—he was stricken by the fact that he had encouraged Carmen and the kids to not drive for their slushies—he told Carmen that they should both kill themselves, or that he alone should die. In tears, Carmen answered that if suicide was what Bob really wanted and needed to do, she would do it with him. But she also offered a powerful counterargument: "She told him that eventually they would be with Troy and Alana again—in heaven," says Lynch. "But if they killed themselves, they wouldn't get there. Now, my brother is fairly skeptical of the Catholic Church, but he thought about it and said, 'If there's any possibility I might be with them again, I don't want to mess that up.'"

To this day, Bob can't mention the word suicide, referring to it only obliquely. "It isn't easy to admit the lows," he says in an uncharacteristically halting voice. "But I've thought of it many times. It is a demon that doesn't go away. I fight it like an alcoholic fights the temptation to drink. We've got so many difficult emotions going on—sadness, loneliness, periods of tremendous anger. But when it comes up, I try to think of some way to help people, to do something positive so that I have a goal. To not go on would be to take an easy way out. And I believe that Carmen's right: We will be reunited with Troy and Alana some day."

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His discussion with Carmen helped him “turn a corner,” Bob says now. It allowed him to begin feeling something other than loss: anger. Two days after the accident, fueled by his conviction that Barreto had been drunk, drugged, or both when she killed his kids, Bob began taking notes, meeting with the chief of the Danville police to review evidence, and pressing Contra Costa District Attorney Bob Kochly to pursue the greatest possible charges against her.



Quietly, almost unwittingly, he became a political activist. In doing so, he discovered a belief of his own, one that has given him the strength to move forward. “An individual who has suffered, like me,” he says, “can create an outcome that will benefit others. One person can move a mountain.”

A little more than three months before the accident, Barreto’s license had been suspended—for the ninth time. She had four DUI arrests on her record dating to 1991. Two days after the crash, court records show, Barreto called the manager of her apartment complex and asked the woman to go to her apartment, find a bag of cocaine that was hidden there, and get rid of it. Police used the manager’s caller ID to locate their suspect outside a San Jose restaurant. She was arrested and jailed in Martinez.

Nine days after the accident, Barreto, who had been working as a nanny in Danville, was charged with cocaine possession, after drugs were confiscated from her Walnut Creek apartment. By the time she was in custody, however, it was too late to test for alcohol and drugs in her system, and that posed a problem for prosecutors. Felony vehicular manslaughter is punishable in California by a prison term of four to 10 years. With the additional charges against her, Barreto faced a possible total of 14 years in prison. But if a case could be made that she’d been under the influence of drugs, alcohol, or both, prosecutors could file second-degree murder charges, which would increase her potential sentence to 15 years to life.

Only days after the accident, Bob began pushing the police and District Attorney Kochly to pursue the second-degree murder charge. Kochly had initially felt the

most effective course was to aim for a straightforward manslaughter conviction. Bob also began studying the drunk-driving laws and talking with local legislators about the prospects of strengthening California's DUI laws.

But that was only a start. By the end of 2003, Bob and Carmen were becoming accomplished public speakers. In addition to talking to police, lawmakers, and the media, they had begun addressing students at local high schools. They spoke to the congregation of East Bay Fellowship, a church near their home that they now attend regularly (in addition to participating in services at St. Joan of Arc, their Catholic church) about grief, faith, and survival in the face of loss.

Most significant, as they have worked with state senators Tom Torlakson (D-Antioch) and Jackie Speier (D-San Francisco/San Mateo) to gain passage of four bills intended to strengthen DUI laws, the Packs have told their story repeatedly to several State Assembly committees in Sacramento.

"Sometimes I don't know how they can share the experience yet again," Torlakson says. "Bob describes what it was like to rush to the scene of the accident to try to help his children and to have them die in his arms. The reality his story brings home is incredibly powerful."

The four new DUI bills—covering everything from the statute of limitations on revealing DUI history to requiring someone convicted of a DUI to prove he completed a treatment program—received a favorable reception in Sacramento. At press time, all four were with Governor Schwarzenegger, awaiting his decision to sign or reject the bills. Already, Bob is consulting with state senators to create another set of DUI bills.

While Bob was consumed with strengthening DUI legislation, Carmen plunged into volunteering with Books for the Barrios, a Concord-based nonprofit that collects books in the United States for elementary schools in the Philippines. Through her efforts, one group collected more than 2,000 books, which were used to fill a library at Pisaan Elementary School on a poor, remote area of the Philippines' Mindanao Island. The brightly painted stucco building is adorned with a large, hand-chiseled wooden sign over its front door: "The Troy and Alana Pack Memorial Library."

Carmen is working on an auction, scheduled for October 2 at San Francisco's Kensington Park Hotel, to support Books for the Barrios. She is also coordinating a candlelight vigil to take place at East Bay Fellowship on October 26, the first anniversary of the accident.

The Troy and Alana Pack Foundation, which Bob and Carmen created, has a three-fold mission: to educate people about traffic safety; to strengthen traffic safety legislation; and, through its very existence, to keep alive memories of Troy and Alana.

“[Bob and Carmen] realized that if they just wallowed in grief, they were not honoring Troy and Alana,” says Lynch of the Packs’ remarkable number of projects. “The core of what’s happened since the accident is that they want to serve their children’s memory in the best way possible.”

This is not to say that they have left their grief behind. At the dedication of a memorial at Sycamore Valley Elementary, the children’s school, on a bright morning in June, Bob and Carmen listened calmly and attentively while Principal Bob Scott talked movingly of their children to the entire school body. They spoke some graceful words of thanks to the large assembly. But as the ceremony ended, Carmen’s attention was caught by some fifth-grade boys—Troy’s classmates—crying by the stone bench at the center of the garden. Within seconds, her poise vanished, and she wept as Bob held her and other family members encircled them.

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“It’s very hard,” says Bob. “[People] want us to enjoy ourselves, and we’ll put on a good face. But sometimes I think they don’t realize that we have this whole other side where we go back home and find misery, and have to try not to reveal that.”



In private, the Packs strive to keep memories of their kids alive. They observed each child’s birthday this past year with their favorite cake and a small family gathering. Their house, which Carmen and Bob describe as too quiet, is filled with large framed photographs and paintings of Troy and Alana—wearing sports uniforms, dressed in holiday finery, grinning brightly, and cuddling with their parents. Sometimes Bob catches himself just staring at the pictures. At other times, says Carmen, she’ll find her husband emerging from one of the children’s bedrooms with tears in his eyes.

The bedrooms are still filled with Troy and Alana’s clothes, furniture, and toys—although their belongings now share space with the dozens of boxes of autographed footballs, toy angels, and cards and letters the Packs received after the accident. Carmen visits their rooms before going to sleep each night, running her hands over Troy’s baseball trophies and collection of Harry Potter videos, wiping dust from the top of the chalkboard easel where Alana’s multiplication tables are still carefully marked. Before she closes the door, Carmen buries her nose in the children’s clothes, or their pillows. “Their pillows still hold their smell,” she says wistfully. “I wish I could preserve that forever.”

This spring, Bob coached the Little League team that Troy would have played on. “As hard as it has been, I needed to be involved with the kids,” he says. “The toughest part is leaving the game or practice alone, while all the other dads are leaving with their kids.” The couple will face the anniversary of the accident this month. And at some point soon, the Packs will have to testify at Barreto’s trial, retelling—and reliving—the nightmare of that evening.

But as they have seen throughout the past 12 months, the Packs are likely to find their neighbors and friends offering strong support. In January, just days before Kochly was to decide whether to press stronger charges against Barreto, some 700

local residents and state legislators gathered at East Bay Fellowship's auditorium to call attention to the case.

Kochly subsequently took the case to a grand jury. In May, the panel decided there was sufficient evidence that Barreto was intoxicated at the time of the accident to indict her on charges of second-degree murder. Kochly's senior deputy, Paul Sequeira, says that evidence includes testimony from two of the nanny's neighbors, who reported to police that she had been drinking and walking and talking strangely.

For her part, Barreto has denied drinking the day of the accident, but she has offered differing accounts of whether she had consumed any drugs. Shortly after her arrest, Barreto told police she had taken two Vicodins and two muscle relaxants during the day. She says they were prescribed for back and knee pain. But in an interview at the Martinez jail with Diablo, she says she didn't take any drugs that day. Sobbing intermittently, Barreto says she had been on a suicide watch and sometimes would rather be dead. "I wish it was me instead of those kids," says the former nanny. "I wish a thousand times over it would have been me."

Pressing for the second-degree murder charge, with its longer sentence, has required the Packs to "walk a very fine line in our value system," Bob says. He hopes Barreto will be convicted—not for revenge, he says, but for justice to be served, and to send a message that people need to be accountable.

The trial is set for October 18, just days before the first anniversary of the accident.

Whatever its outcome, the Packs have begun a process that may say more than any of their other projects about life after the deaths of Troy and Alana: The couple is trying to have another child—or two. "It would be a dream to have a couple of children," says Bob. "The chances are not in our favor because we're both over 40. But we're still optimistic, and we're going to keep trying."

If they are unable to get pregnant on their own, they say they will accept an offer from one of Carmen's young Peruvian nieces to be an egg donor. "We can't picture our future without children," says Carmen, who is now 44. "The only thing I want to do in the world is be a mom. So one way or the other, I'm going to do that again."

Of course, the Packs can never go back to being the family they were before the accident. While they dream of having more kids and, in Bob's words, "being integrated back into the community and doing again all the things we enjoyed so

much with our kids,” they will never shake their awareness of what they have lost. Nor will they shed the new knowledge—about themselves and the world around them—that they have gained.

“I read a quote somewhere that held a lot of meaning for me,” Bob says. “It goes, ‘We try to teach our children all about life, but it is our children who teach us what life is all about.’ I think of that often.”

For more on the Packs and their projects, visit the Troy and Alana Pack Foundation Web site at www.troyandalana.org.