

Chicago's First Pedestrian Critical Mass

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by Leah Pietrusiak

To change the streets, they poured out into them.

A group of about 100 left from the Empty Bottle and traveled down Western, into the intersection at Division, and formed a circle surrounded by anxious heated vehicles. And then to North where they reclaimed the crosswalks in an unmarked flow.

But on that windy blue afternoon, the moving body of family, friends, residents and activists had security in numbers and the help of police—unlike the two men who had brought them to the crash sites. Whose fates the group aimed to keep from other pedestrians.

Chris Saathoff and Benjamin Dominguez Vazquez died within hours of each other on February 14 in Wicker Park along Western Avenue; both were hit-and-run incidents. Chris Saathoff, age 26, a musician and web designer, was hit while in a crosswalk at Division with girlfriend Tiffany Weeder coming from the Empty Bottle. By an underage drunk driver in an SUV who ran a red light. (The offender was later taken into custody and is awaiting trial.) Vazquez, age 50, whose case details have not been disclosed, was hit less than a half mile away at North.

“We tried to do the right thing—we were leaving a bar, a place where alcohol is served—and we made the right choice by walking home,” Weeder said at the March 20 gathering.

“And it’s frustrating that no matter how hard we try to go to these lengths to stay safe—unless people are aware how much it affects so many people...it needs to stop, you know?”

In trying to find a positive response to the tragedy, Saathoff’s family and friends teamed up with a pedestrian advocacy group called Logan Square Walks (LSW), whose organizer Christy Prahll cited that over 4500 pedestrians are injured at the hands of motorists in Illinois; 245 are killed every year, on average.

“This is a public health crisis—pedestrian safety is an issue that deserves attention—not only on the part of us as pedestrians, but on the part of motorists who go by, our elected officials, our law enforcement agencies, and civic groups,” she proclaimed into a bullhorn over the traffic behind her.

LSW first formed around such issues as the traffic flow around the Logan Square Monument, but has a wider mission of making such groups citywide and part of the “city planning equation,” according to Prahll. For example, the group has been invited to sit in on task force for a new plaza to be built in Logan Square.

Though civic planning is useful, some reporters at the march questioned what difference traffic controls or road reconstruction would make when a drunk driver is involved.

“People have asked that before, saying that what happened to Chris was really hard to prevent,” responded Quinn Goodwillie, a friend of Saathoff’s. “But I think that it’s pretty much everyone’s wish here that any good that can come of this for anybody...it’s a starting point to help prevent other accidents.”

In the clear sky of March 20 that hummed with engines, participants rode up on bikes, or battled their way across Western Avenue. “Western’s scary, frightening. Frightening,” Shawn Podgurski, a friend of Saathoff’s, observed dryly. “I don’t feel safe on Western. Or being near it at all.”

Some carried signs, “Slow Down!” and “People First (Not Cars).” Nancy Rohlen carried a sign that read “Benjamin Dominguez Vazquez,” whose family reportedly had returned to Mexico.

“I didn’t know Benjamin, but I’m here representing everybody who basically takes their lives out of their own hands when they cross the street when they’re out walking,” said Rohlen, who mentioned a recent experience with a bus that came about six inches from hitting her.

Throughout the route, some walkers chatted lightly enjoying the stroll, others walked in thought. Some swapped between the two or just rode the emotional wave from the night before when Chin Up Chin Up, the band for which Chris had played bass, headlined a benefit to raise money for the Chris Saathoff Foundation, established to raise funds to build a memorial arts/music center.

“We were playing on pure emotion basically--it wasn’t like a show, a normal show,” said Greg Sharp (Goodwillie played bass) “It was a gathering, a celebration.”

When the march approached the corner of Division, some cautiously paused in silence at the corner of the first incident; family members and friends comforted each other in the space.

Police escorts encouraged participants to make a circle in the middle of the intersection, a move similar to the cyclists of Critical Mass who reclaim the roads for bicycles every last Friday of the month on rides leaving from Daley Plaza.

Participants stood in a uniform moment of silence, broken by a car horn or siren hear and there.

They then continued North to where Vazquez was struck.

Prahl pointed out how the sidewalks narrowed the further north the group walked, pushing pedestrians closer to oncoming traffic at the volatile intersection. After completing the square, “reclaiming the crosswalks,” the ceremony ended. What Logan Square Walks already considers a success is that people are talking about it. “It’s very much at the forefront of some aldermen’s and city officials’ vocabulary,” Prahl said.

Alderman Manny Flores (1st) participated in the march, a former litigator who used to prosecute such cases. “In areas where you have a lot of congestion, or don’t have the right type of traffic-controlling devices, you’re gonna have accidents,” Flores said. “So we need to have streets that are going to be friendly to pedestrians, where people can feel safe riding their bicycles—and also where people can feel safe driving.”

Podgurski also pointed out the importance of support from both sides. “It’s gotta be at both ends—both motorists and pedestrians—there are a lot of people out there running out in front of cars and running all over the place and they’re not even thinking...”

For everyone, especially family and friends of Chris Saathoff, the success of the walk comes with anyone who thinks twice about drinking and driving. Brad Saathoff, Chris’ dad, spoke briefly before the march commenced, starting out, “This is the kind of day he would have been out on the streets biking around, everyone who knows him knows that...”

Chris’ mom, Marlene, commented later: “Anything that can bring awareness to keep people from drinking and driving—anything helps. Even if it’s to change one person.”

For more information on Logan Square Walks and their efforts, contact www.logansquarewalks.org.