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Mom, 1-year-old child die of carbon monoxide poisoning while sitting in car in Passaic

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STAFF WRITERS | THE RECORD

PASSAIC — The invisible killer carbon monoxide struck with tragic consequences Saturday night, taking the lives of a 23-year-old mother and her 1-year-old son and left her 3-year-old daughter in critical condition as they sat in a car to keep warm while her husband was digging it out of the snow, authorities said.

The deadly fumes apparently backed up into the car because its tailpipe was clogged with snow, Police Detective Andy White said.

The woman's husband had been shoveling for about 20 minutes and when he went to the car, parked outside 47 Sherman St., he found that he couldn't wake up his family and called for help, White said.

Authorities declined to identify the victims, but neighbors said they were Sashalynn Rosa, 23, and her son Messiah, 1. Her daughter, who was listed in "very critical" condition at St. Joseph's Regional Medical Center in Paterson, was identified by neighbors as Saniyah, 3.

The identity of the father could not be learned immediately.

When police arrived at the scene at about 8:15 p.m., they found that the mother and children had been pulled from the car, and neighbors were trying to revive them with cardiopulmonary resuscitation, or CPR, White said.

"What we have here is a family that came out, the storm was over, to play in the snow and clean the car," said Mayor Alex Blanco on Sunday, standing near the white, four-door Mazda, with a child-size breathing mask and other first aid equipment still lying on the ground in front of the car.

"While outside, the mother and children felt cold so they went inside the car to warm up while the husband continued to clean the car," Blanco said.

"What they didn't foresee was the snow covered the exhaust system, so the fumes had nowhere to go but inside the car," the mayor added.

"With carbon monoxide, you can't smell it and can't see it, so they just fell asleep," Blanco said. "The husband noticed they were unconscious inside, knocked on the window and then called 911 right away. EMS came and found they had no pulse, tried to resuscitate them and unfortunately we lost the mother and the 1-year-old. The 3-year old is fighting for her life right now at St. Joseph's."

Blanco said he was certain the three victims in the car did not know what had happened. "They didn't realize this, otherwise I'm pretty sure they would have opened a window," he said.



MITSU YASUKAWA/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Flowers and candles are seen in front of a white Mazda where the mother and child died, parked along Sherman Street in Passaic on Sunday, Jan. 24, 2016.



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"It's heartbreaking, it's something you can't foresee," Blanco said. "It's something that is not on 'the list' of things not to do during a storm. We'll all have to add that to the list. Something like this, I probably would have made the same mistake."

On Facebook, there were photos posted of Rosa and her son, Messiah, and daughter, Saniyah, whose names were referenced in the condolences.

Blanco added: "He was just cleaning the car. If you look at the muffler, it is very clogged. It only takes a few minutes."

The danger of carbon monoxide poisoning in a snowbound car is one of several wintertime hazards on the list of safety tips published every year by the Rutgers Poison Information and Education System.

"Remove snow from car exhaust pipe(s) before sitting in car and letting it warm up," the poison information center warns. "Failure to remove snow can result in carbon monoxide poisoning. Be sure there is ample room for air to circulate in front and behind your car to allow any exhaust to dissipate and not build up around your car."

The car was still half covered with snow Sunday afternoon, showing where the father stopped in the middle of cleaning it. A snow brush was on the windshield where he had left it. A small memorial was placed on a snowbank to the left of the car. It included flowers, candles and a small cross.

"I knew her from high school, she was a senior when I was a junior," said Angel Sanchez, 22, who lives one block away. "She was really a nice person. She was just part of a family that is working hard. She was all about her family. She was always with her kids - it was the only thing you'd see on her Facebook; pictures of her and her kids. Honestly, that tells you the story better than I ever could."

Wilfredo Ortiz, who lives on the same street where the car was parked, said: "It's hard. They were a good family, you know? Just working hard to get by. A good man has lost his wife and his baby. They never fought, they were a good family, she was a good wife and they were just good people. I couldn't say a bad thing about them if I tried."

Ivonne Figueroa, who lives right in front of where the car was parked, said she saw a commotion outside when she came home on Saturday night and drew on her own experience as a nurse from "years ago" to start administering CPR to the mother and her family.

Police and paramedics arrived "very quickly" and took over. "They tried to help as much as they could," she said of the first responders. "It's just important for people to know that this can happen, it's not something you'd ever think of."

Rosa's Facebook page, which previously had been the place where she posted pictures of herself with her two children, was transformed overnight into a memorial page as friends and relatives poured out their grief at the news.

"There aren't words to explain how heavy my heart is feeling! My friend & her son were taken from us way way WAY too soon!" said one friend. "My prayers go out to her family! Sashalynn Rosa We love you! & no matter what, we will all be here for your daughter & wish her a fast recovery! She has us ALL!"

"Still In Tears. I Swear Life is Too Short & Precious," said another. "Didn't Even get a Chance to Tell you I Love you Or Baby boy. I just Seen you nothing But Tears in My Eyes As I Write this. R.I.P. Sashaa & Messiah. Love y'all prayers to Niyah & If She Need me I'm There w/No Questions Asked."

"RIP to my cousins Sashalynn Rosa and little Messiah," wrote Jaylynn Oliveras. "Such a tragic accident. Going to miss you both."

The Facebook page also had photos posted of Rosa and her son, Messiah, and daughter, Saniyah, whose names were referenced in many of the condolences.

The Rutgers Poison Information center also urges people to check batteries in carbon monoxide and smoke detectors, and install detectors immediately if they are missing; and to clear any snow accumulation from all outside dryer and heating vents.

The center warns against bringing a portable gas powered generator into the home or garage, or placing them outside near any open windows or doors. Generators should be at least 25 feet from any house, the center says. Also, it warns against bringing any gas powered equipment, propane stoves, propane lights, or kerosene camping stoves into the house or garage or heating a home with a stove.

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