

# Fiery freeway crash claims life of driver

By Ryan Tutak  
staff writer

A truck carrying gasoline overturned and exploded on westbound I-96 just west of Farmington Hills Tuesday, killing the driver and spraying flames above the Meadowbrook Road overpass and on to a pickup truck traveling east.

John Zlantis, 32, of Novi, was the driver and lone occupant, said Rick Cramer, general manager of M&L Petroleum in Mt. Pleasant, which owned the tanker.

Zlantis had worked for M&L for two years, Cramer said. Witnesses said the tanker's cab blew a steering tire on the driver's side, collided into the cement median and then rolled over three lanes into the ditch on the highway's north side around 11:20 a.m.

"He blew a tire, went up against the median and lost control of the truck," said Bruce Dawson of Westland, who saw the accident while driving east on I-96.

THE TANKER, carrying between 13,000 and 14,000 gallons of gasoline, spilled the fuel across the highway, igniting several fires on both sides of the median. Only the tanker's frame, bare wheels and burned-out cab remained.

"I've never seen flames that high in my life," said Don Mingerink of Grand Rapids, who was driving east on I-96.

"I heard an explosion and a bang. I looked in my rear-view mirror and

*'I've never seen flames that high in my life. I heard an explosion and a bang. I looked in my rear-view mirror and just saw the bridge and whole truck in flames. I didn't slow down right away if you know what I mean.'*

— Don Mingerink  
crash witness

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A driver and passenger of a pickup truck heading east on I-96 jumped out of the moving vehicle after it caught fire. They told a reporter they suffered no major injuries.

Firefighters from Novi extinguished the flames around noon and doused the tanker with chemical foam, with assistance from Farmington Hills and Commerce Township departments.

Around noon, authorities blocked access to the Meadowbrook Road overpass, black from smoke, saying it was unstable.

First Lt. Jack Moulik, of Michigan State Police, said he didn't know of any other injuries.

Scott Daniel of the Novi News contributed to this report.

White chemical foam used to douse the huge fire covers what's left of the gasoline tanker and the surrounding area (above). The tanker had been carrying about 13,000 gallons of gasoline. Firefighters needed about 30 minutes to put out the blaze. Farmington Hills firefighters (right) stand by on the Meadowbrook Road bridge over I-96 in Novi.

photos by SHARON LAMIEUX/staff photographer



The view from the Meadowbrook Road bridge over I-96 in Novi shows traffic halted in both directions as firefighters battle a gasoline tanker blaze.

## Survey says area women more likely to buckle up

By Joanne Maliszewski  
staff writer

Women in Farmington Hills wear safety belts more than men.

That's one of the results of an October survey taken by the Farmington Amateur Radio Club for the community-based Farmington Hills Buckle Up Committee, spearheaded by the Farmington Hills Police Department.

The survey, conducted three mornings in early October of 2,052 vehicles or drivers, and 148 passengers showed compliance to the state's safety belt law was an average 71.8 percent.

The women in that survey wore their safety belts 75.4 percent and the men, 68.7 percent.

These numbers are compared to an August study that showed a 69.7 percent average compliance. At that time, women drivers and passengers wore their safety belts 72.4 percent and the men, 67.5 percent.

"Women may be involved with shorter trips," said Sgt. Ray Cranston of the Farmington Hills Police Department's traffic section. "Non-police data shows that women also may be more susceptible to the media. They are more likely to read printed media the kids bring home (about wearing safety belts). Women are more exposed to their children and the concepts they learn."

THE BUCKLE UP program involves the Oakland County Health Department, the media, Farmington Public Schools and civic organizations. Along with education and publicity efforts to urge motorists to buckle up, Farmington Hills police also have beefed up enforcement of the safety belt law. The Buckle Up program's goal was a compliance rate

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— Charles Tanton  
survey crew  
chairman

of 70 percent. One more survey is expected.

"It is difficult to conclude from the survey results that there has been a significant improvement in seatbelt usage between the two surveys (August and October)," wrote survey crew chairman Charles Tanton. "The small percentage changes shown in the results could be contributed to errors in taking the sample."

"However, the overall results of approximately 70 percent compliance are encouraging but we still have a way to go so that everyone appreciates the need for seatbelt usage."

Beefed-up enforcement of the safety belt law began in earnest in September. In July, police issued 83 safety belt violations. September saw a jump to 189 violations, plus six child restraint violations, Cranston said.

"We had a push for that type of enforcement. The level of enforcement will remain higher than it was," he said.

Cranston and other traffic and police officials have no doubt that safety belts have helped reduce deaths and serious injuries.

CONSIDER THAT in 1988, 335 people suffered serious injuries — injuries needing medical attention — and in 1989, 325 received serious

injuries. In 1990, the number dropped to 258 and in the first nine months of 1991, 146 people received serious injuries.

"It's certainly a significant contribution (to reducing serious injuries) with safety belts," Cranston said.

Keep in mind that during those years — any years actually in Farmington Hills — the general traffic flow increases 7 percent. "But injuries and accidents also have been going down."

Though police acknowledge that for some people safety belts — particularly the harnesses — are uncomfortable, they nonetheless encourage compliance.

"Once you've put the harness under your arm, you have defeated the purpose of the safety belt. It is to protect your upper torso," said traffic officer Don Fradette.

The safety belt law requires all drivers and front seat passengers to buckle up. Police can ticket violators only as a secondary stop. That means you have to be stopped for another violation. When the officer notices you aren't belted when you are stopped for another violation, then you can be ticketed.

Police can stop you as a primary stop — which means you don't need to be stopped for another violation first — if your child under one year of age isn't in a child car seat in the front or back seats.

As a primary stop, you can be ticketed if your child 1-4 years of age is not in a child car seat in the front seat or in a child car seat or safety belt in the back seat.

Police also can stop you as a secondary stop if your children ages 4-16 are not wearing safety belts while in the front seat or back seat. There are no legal requirements for passengers 16 years and older to wear a safety belt in the back seat.

Violation of the safety belt law carries a \$35 fine and violations of the child restraint law a \$60 fine. No points are assessed against your driving record.

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