

Hit-And-Run Victim Is Center Of Relatives' Universe

By DANIELA ALTIMARI | *The Hartford Courant*

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"WE STILL GOT HIM. We're going to enjoy every moment we have him," says Angel Arce of his father, Angel Arce Torres. Arce kisses his father while visiting him Thursday at the Hospital for Special Care in New Britain. Torres, 78, victim of a hit-and-run last May in Hartford, is paralyzed from the neck down. (PATRICK RAYCRAFT / HARTFORD COURANT / December 25, 2008)

- The son approached the father's chair and began to gingerly massage his head. A small smile fluttered across the older man's face.

The father is Angel Arce Torres, 78, struck by a hit-and-run driver as he crossed Park Street one afternoon last May. The accident, captured on videotape, drew national attention. For a brief moment, the grainy image of Torres on the ground in full view of people who seemed — in this snippet of tape — indifferent to his plight became, in the eyes of many, the tragic embodiment of a city out of control.

The nation's attention has long since drifted; Torres remains paralyzed from the neck down. His life, once brimming with things to do and places to go, is now contained within a small room on the second floor of the Hospital for Special Care in [New Britain](#).

The son is named Angel Arce and, over the past seven months, he has spent many of his waking hours in this hospital room.

The father cannot walk and needs a respirator to breathe. He can speak, but no sound comes out, so the son has learned to read his lips. He cannot eat solid food, so the son feeds him small sips of broth, melted ice cream and coffee through a straw. When he has an itch, the son is there to scratch it.

"We're not going to abandon our father," said Arce, who has emerged as the spokesman for this sprawling, yet tightly bound, family. "We want to be part of his everyday life, just like before. He took

care of us, now we're going to take care of him."

Christmas Day brought a crush of visitors to Torres' hospital room. It wasn't like those big, boisterous Christmases of years past, when people filled the Torres' home on Main Street and the tables were heavy with plates of pork, rice and peas and other Puerto Rican specialties.

This year, family members ate cups of clam chowder from the hospital cafeteria and strained to be heard above the din of infomercials from the television of the patient who shares the room. Arce presented his father with a blanket instead of one of the electronic gizmos he used to love to get as gifts.

But the family was here, and to Torres that's all that really matters. His mother died shortly after his birth in Puerto Rico, and at age 12 Torres lost his father. Arce said, "He always tried to give us what he never had." These days Torres is alert and trying to adjust to his new reality. He has not spoken of the accident and just wants to go home.

Meanwhile, his son continues his quest for justice. He met a few weeks ago with Hartford's police chief and the detectives assigned to investigate the accident. No arrests have been made.

"It's been more than six long months and still nothing," Arce said. "It's so sad ... this is a city my father loved so much."

And so does he. "It's a good city," Arce said. "But somebody out there knows something, and I am begging them to come forward. ... Deep in my heart of hearts, I know there are people who want to help."

Arce knows there are many families in Hartford grasping for the same answers. In a way, he figures he's lucky. "At least we still have our father. We don't have him like we used to but at least we still have him with us. ... So many others have lost everything, and they haven't gotten justice yet, either."

Besides, Torres isn't one to hold grudges, his family says.

Yet time hasn't healed all. Arce still hasn't watched the infamous videotape. Torres' granddaughter, Roselyn Vazquez, can't bear to visit the spot on Park Street where he was struck. She lost interest in baseball because watching games just wasn't the same without him. And she does a double take every time she sees a white Pontiac like the one he used to drive.

"It's so weird driving around Hartford and not bumping into him," Vazquez said. "I can come in here every day and never get used to seeing him like this."

Arce is comforted by the fact that Hartford police have not given up, but has less faith in the city's political establishment. In the wake of the accident, everybody from the mayor on down reached out to the family, but "now it seems like everyone has forgotten."

Not everyone. Each Friday, something arrives in the mail from an elderly couple in Washington state who read a news account about Torres and were moved by his story. Usually, it's a card with a cheery message; sometimes it's a stuffed animal. Once, it was a Bible.

"These are people we don't even know," Arce says, marveling at the kindness of strangers.

Before the accident, Torres was that kind of a guy. A retiree who worked for 30 years in manufacturing, he bagged groceries for the local food bank and shuttled neighbors to their doctor appointments and grocery stops.

A fixture on Park Street, he loved playing dominoes and following the Yankees. But he loved his family — his wife, Gladys, his seven children, his 17 grandchildren and his 33 great-grandchildren — most of all. His routine also included taking his great-grandchildren to school and buying fruit at a local store, recalled Vazquez.

Since his hospitalization, two more great-grandchildren have arrived, and his 50th wedding anniversary has come and gone. His children arranged for their parents to renew their wedding vows in the hospital. With a priest presiding, it was an emotional moment, especially for Torres' wife.

"She was so full of joy," Arce said. His mother does her best to stay positive, he added. "She's been so strong throughout this. ... She tries to hide her emotional pain, but when she's alone, she cries."

Now that Christmas is over, Arce is bracing for New Year's Eve. It was his tradition to call his father every year at midnight to wish him a happy new year. The older man would invariably be sleeping.

This year, Arce and Torres will usher in the new year together, in the hospital room.