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Couple Wage Web Fight for New Roof Test Victim, His Wife Gather Signatures to Send To Bush

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Bill Vlasic and Jeff Plungis

CHILDRESS, Texas — Their home is a speck on the landscape, a little house lost among the vast cattle ranches and cotton fields of the Texas panhandle.

But inside, armed with a personal computer, Dena and Patrick Parker are leading an Internet campaign to change one of the nation's oldest auto-safety regulations.

They are unlikely activists, a country couple who lived a quiet life until Patrick's spinal cord was crushed in a 2001 rollover accident that flattened the roof of a Ford F-250 SuperCab pickup.

Now, the Parkers are preparing to petition President Bush, Congress and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to overhaul Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standard 216.

Their message is simple. If the government required stronger vehicle roofs, Patrick would not be a quadriplegic today.

"We need to stop this from happening," Dena said in her soft, southern drawl. "These are the standards people live and die by, and it's just not acceptable."

Their online petition has drawn support from Alabama to Alaska, with e-mail responses coming in from as far away



Brandy Baker / The Detroit News

Dena and Patrick Parker, on their 30-acre property in Childress, Texas, have drawn support from as far away as Alaska, Brazil and Great Britain in their crusade to change roof regulations. "I want to help get the changes we need," Dena says. "NHTSA has let us down big-time, and we know it."

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It's a grass-roots crusade, and a compelling addition to the chorus of auto-safety advocates pushing for a tougher roof-strength law.

With the aid of the Internet, the Parkers are determined to make a difference when NHTSA issues its proposed revisions to rule 216 later this year.

"I wasn't mad at all at anybody for a long time," said Patrick, 39. "Then I started reading all this stuff on the Internet."



Brandy Baker / The Detroit News

Dena Parker helps her husband, Patrick, ride an electrical stimulation bike. Their lives revolve around exercise and trips to the doctor.

What they found were dozens of documents and articles critiquing rule 216 and criticizing Detroit's Big Three automakers for defending it for decades.

"I typed in Ford and rollover and you could not believe the stuff that was coming on the screen," Dena said. "I was getting very upset. How can this be allowed to go on?"

Her research led her to thepetitionsite.com, a Web site billed as "dedicated to giving you a voice to the world."

Dena added her voice to the site last summer.

"We the undersigned," her petition begins, "believe that it is time for our government to step in and protect consumers from large corporations,

namely the auto manufacturers, from producing, marketing and selling unsafe vehicles to unaware consumers."

At last count, Dena had collected 360 signatures online and 57 in person. When she finishes her cover letter, she plans to send the petition to Bush, NHTSA chief Dr. Jeffrey Runge, and all 535 members of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives.

Can a 37-year-old Texas homemaker and her disabled husband make an impact on public policy in Washington, D.C.?

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Seat belts don't help

Nearly 7,000 deaths and severe injuries occur each year in rollovers in which the roofs were crushed, according to federal crash statistics. More than half of the victims were wearing seat belts, just as Patrick Parker was on the morning of Aug. 29, 2001.

He left his home shortly after 5 a.m. and headed south on Highway 287 to a morning meeting in Wichita Falls. A systems technician for the local public utility, he was driving a company-owned, 2001 Ford F-250 SuperCab.

When Patrick crossed the county line about 15 miles down the road, a deer hopped out of the median, directly in front of his pickup.

He tried to avoid it, but a second deer surprised him. It hit the right front fender, and he lost control. The truck tipped over, and rolled right several times. It came to rest upside down, with Patrick hanging from his lap-and-shoulder belt.

The engine quit, but the radio was still playing.

“I thought, if I’m fixing to die, I don’t want that stupid radio on,” he said. “I was trying to turn the key off but I couldn’t. I didn’t know why.”

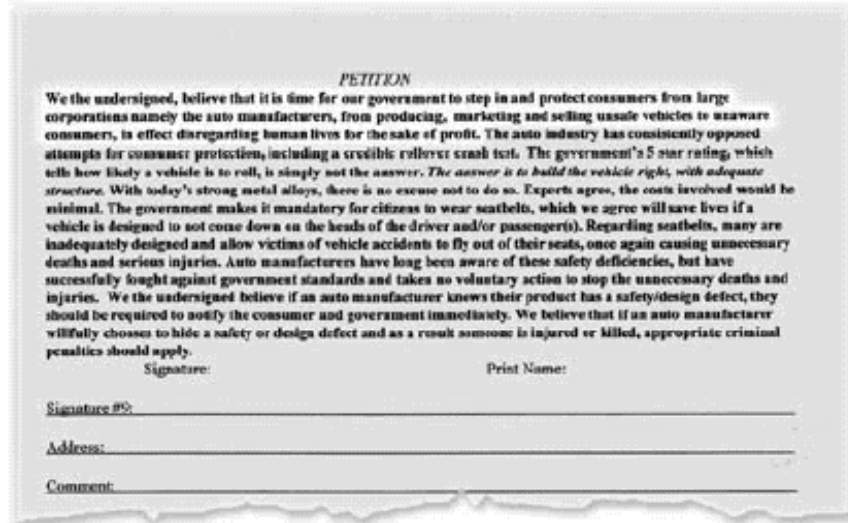
His neck was broken, and his spinal cord crushed between two vertebrae. A passing motorist stopped and called police.

Dena Parker was walking out the door on her way to work when the police dispatcher called. As she drove to the hospital, she tried to stay calm.

“I was thinking everything is going to be OK,” she said. “But you don’t know. You’re never prepared for something like this.”

Patrick underwent eight hours of surgery, but the damage had been done. He was paralyzed from the chest down.

Months of rehabilitation haven’t improved his condition.



Patrick and Dena Parker have collected 360 signatures online and 57 in person on their petition, which will go to President Bush, NHTSA and Congress.

“As hard as he has tried,” Dena said, “he still can’t wriggle a toe.”

Ford settles suit

In August 2002, the Parkers sued Ford Motor Co. in U.S. District Court for “designing, manufacturing, distributing and promoting a vehicle that was known to be prone to roof crush in a rollover accident.”

Last Dec. 10, on the eve of their trial date, Ford made a settlement offer. The Parkers accepted, on Ford’s condition that they keep the monetary amount confidential.

But settling the lawsuit hardly satisfied Dena and Patrick.

“They expect it to be over with, but it’s not over with,” Dena said. “In order to make it right, they have to quit making vehicles this way.”

Patrick, once an avid hunter and outdoorsman, now makes his way around their 30-acre spread in a motorized wheelchair with oversized tires.

He tries his best to keep a positive attitude, but sometimes the grief pours out.

“One day, my wife was out there doing things, getting ready for the storm,” he said as he looked out the back door. “I just started bawling. She’s doing stuff, and I can’t help her.”

On a blustery March morning, Dena set out to feed their two dogs, seven cats and the three horses kept in a metal corral that Patrick welded himself.

“Patrick put in a 3,000-foot-long water line,” Dena said. “He put in a gas line. He could do anything.”

Parked nearby was their Ford F-250 pickup, with a horse trailer attached. They’ve wanted to sell it since Patrick was injured in his company’s truck almost three years ago.

“We’d just as soon not have it,” Dena said. “But if we go out and get a Chevy or Dodge, who’s to say it’s going to be any better?”

Instead, they bought a thick, steel rollbar and had it installed in the pickup’s cab.

Why, Patrick asks, can’t every, heavy-duty work truck have one?

“It’s a problem if they add 50 pounds more weight to the vehicle?” he said.

“Good grief, it’s a three-quarter-ton pickup. That’s like adding a 5-gallon water can.”

Their lives revolve around Patrick’s paralysis — exercise in the mornings, 200-mile round trips to his doctor, longer trips to see a spinal-cord specialist in St. Louis, Mo.

But in the evenings, Dena is at the computer, with Patrick at her side, composing her letter to Washington.

She wants it to be perfect, for her voice to be heard.

“I don’t really care how they do it,” Dena said. “They can test these vehicles without the windshield and on both sides at three times their own weight, and the force is going to be applied at a 45-degree angle.”

Maybe, she said, that would have saved Patrick. “That’ll give somebody a chance to walk away,” she said. “But when you’re building vehicles like this, you’re not giving them a chance.”



Brandy Baker / The Detroit News

Patrick Parker's spinal cord was crushed in a 2001 rollover accident that flattened the roof of his company-owned Ford F-250 SuperCab pickup.