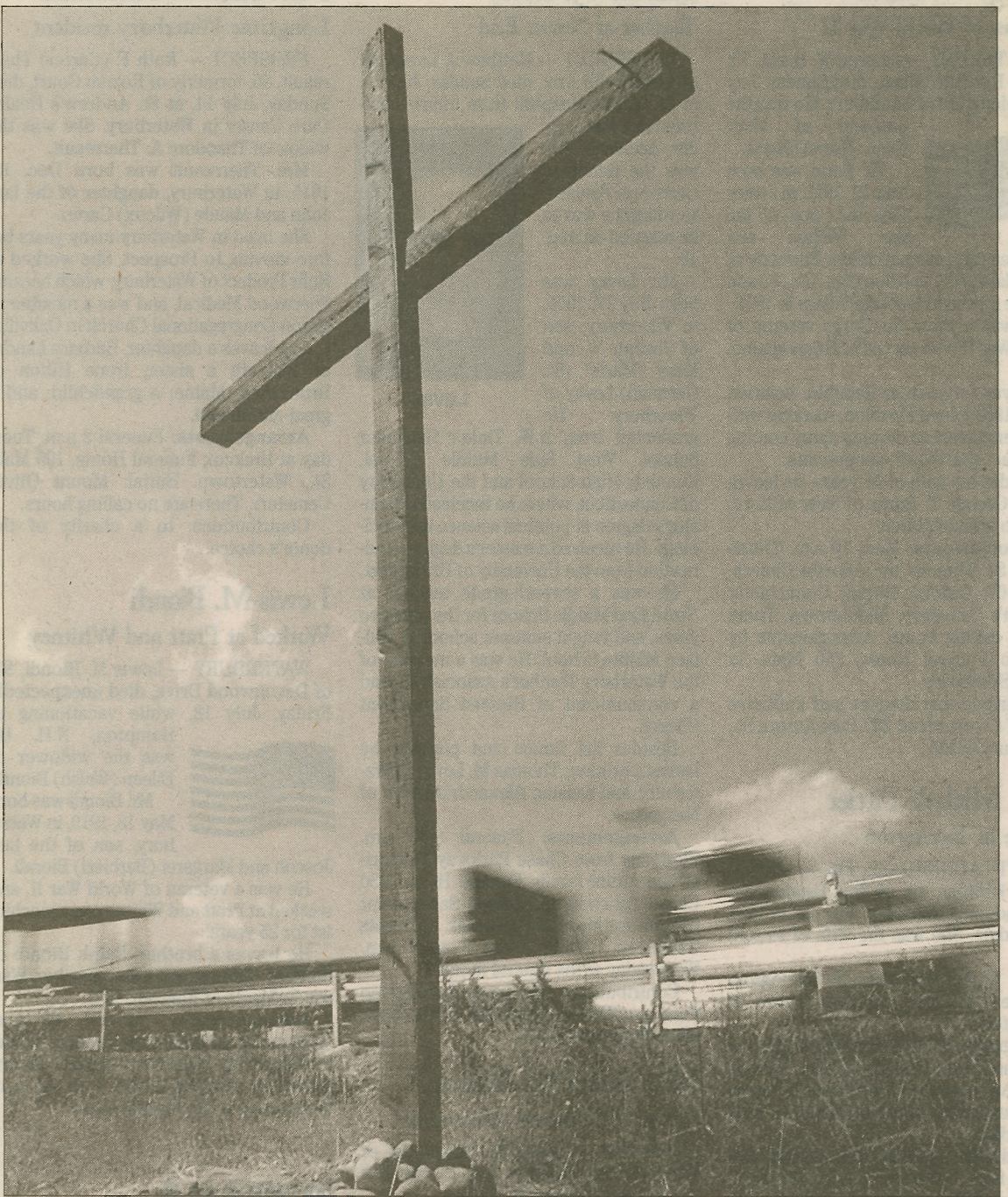


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Danese Kenon / Democrat and Chronicle

A wooden cross has been set up at the site where a bus crashed near Rochester, N.Y., last month. Five Waterbury residents were killed in the crash on the New York Thruway.

Charges against bus driver in fatal crash expected soon

By **Cara Rubinsky**
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WATERBURY — Charges could be filed this week against the driver of a bus that crashed outside of Rochester, N.Y., killing five Waterbury residents and injuring 39 other passengers.

Members of three local Pentecostal churches were returning from a three-day trip to Niagara Falls on June 23 when Arrow Line/Coach USA driver William Hovan lost control of the chartered bus. It overturned, crashed through a guardrail, and slid down a 75-foot embankment on the New York Thruway.

Police believe Hovan, 59, a Trumbull resident, might have dozed off. They say he spent the three days before the crash gambling in a casino and slept just a few hours.

Killed were Kennedy High School students Alex Blondet and Jazmine Santiago, both 16; longtime couple Maikel Mota and Eneroliza Polanco, both 29; and Polanco's cousin, Ruth Restituyo, 30. All belonged to Church of God Tabernaculo Oracion on East Main Street.

Their deaths touched off a weeklong outpouring of grief that still hasn't entirely subsided. Even three weeks after the accident, signs of the victims can be found all over the city. Posters in memory of Santiago and Blondet hang in the lobby of Kennedy, where students held a memorial service the week of the crash.

A car parked in front of the Brass Mill Center on Monday had "RIP Jazzy S., we love you," painted in white on the back windshield. A poster was tacked

next to it with the words "We miss you Jazmine" above a picture of the smiling teen.

Mota and Polanco's 18-month-old daughter, Lixzy, has been released from Strong Memorial Hospital in Rochester, where most of the seriously injured were treated. Lixzy, whose lung was punctured, was the last victim to leave the hospital. She is expected to recover.

Ontario County District Attorney Michael Tantillo said he expects the criminal case against Hovan to go to a New York state grand jury either this week or next. Indictments could come the same day. Hovan is likely to be charged with second-degree manslaughter, though the grand jury could opt to charge him with second-degree murder.

Meanwhile, local attorneys are starting to file civil suits on behalf of the injured.

Watertown attorney Mike D'Amico is representing Eva Velez, 53; her daughter, Elizabeth Velez, 19; and Eva's brother, Juan Pabon, 51. All three are still being treated for broken bones, cuts and bruises, some of which could lead to permanent health problems.

D'Amico has drafted a 12-page suit against both Hovan and Arrow Line/Coach USA.