

## Death was a constant in 6-year-old victim's life

by Benjamin Alexander-Bloch, The Times-Picayune

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Two days before she died in a Christmas morning car crash, a 6-year-old girl said to a relative, "Auntie, I don't want to die."

That Tuesday morning, Diavion Hite was at the funeral of a great-aunt. She was thinking about life and death, a topic that had frequently weaved in and out of her young life.

"I said, 'Baby, you're not going to die.' And then of course, Christmas morning, Christmas morning, Christmas morning, this is what I find out ... that was their Christmas morning," another great-aunt, Barbara Dickerson, said Saturday.

Diavion and her brother Kyren Thomas, 3, died just after midnight on Thursday when an 18-wheeler smashed into their family's sport utility vehicle and a Lincoln sedan along Interstate 10 in LaPlace, between the Belle Terre and U.S. 51 exits.

A family friend, Danielle Adams, 26, of New Orleans, also died in the crash, and Adams' boyfriend, Lewis Knoten, 26, was injured. Their daughter, Laila Knoten, 3, was taken to the critical burn unit at Baton Rouge General Hospital.

Nurses said Saturday that Laila was in the intensive-care unit at Baton Rouge General's Bluebonnet campus, but they would not comment on her condition.

Diavion and Kyren's mother, Candace Walker, 23, suffered severe injuries, including second- to third-degree burns on 20 percent of her body. She remained in serious condition Saturday in the burn unit at LSU Health Sciences Center in Shreveport.

Knoten, the driver of the SUV, a GMC Yukon, and Alvin Welch, 27, Walker's fiance, suffered moderate injuries.

Adams was driving with Laila in the 2000 Lincoln sedan from Houston to New Orleans on Christmas Eve when the car got a flat tire, according to family members. Adams called Knoten, whom she had been dating since high school, to come to her aid. Since Hurricane Katrina, Adams and Knoten had lived in both Houston and New Orleans, relatives said.

Knoten, Walker, Welch and the children jumped into the SUV and met Adams at the scene. After waiting hours for roadside assistance, they got fed up, relatives said.

Welch said he would drive the Lincoln along the shoulder of the highway to the nearest exit. Knoten was driving the SUV behind him. Each vehicle had hazard lights flashing, according to Lewis Knoten's cousin, Dominique Harris, and other relatives who said they spoke to Knoten and Welch since the crash.

"Lewis said that he couldn't go over 5 mph because of the tire. He saw the exit 10 feet ahead of them," said Harris, 29. "Alvin says all he remembers next is waking up in the hospital."

The driver of the 18-wheeler, Tammy Westbrook, 39, of St. Rose, told police she saw the two vehicles but couldn't swerve fast enough to avoid the crash. The truck slammed into the Yukon, which crashed into the 2000 Lincoln sedan ahead of it. Westbrook suffered minor injuries.

State Trooper David Easley and Stephen J. Price, a member of the Ponderosa Volunteer Fire Department in Spring, Texas, happened to be driving by the accident site. They pulled Knoten, Walker and 3-year-old Laila from the burning car, authorities and family members said.

Easley and Price couldn't reach the other victims in time, police said.

Easley was taken to a nearby hospital, where he was treated for minor burns to his hands and smoke inhalation, authorities said. He was released later in the day.

The accident is still under investigation, State Police said Saturday. No charges have been filed, and police said they do not suspect that any of the drivers was impaired by alcohol or drugs.

Relatives said that Diavion "cared about things going on around her in the world" and that she'd often ask her grandmother questions about life.

"She was 6, but in a sense she was probably 12," her grandmother, Greta Walker, said.

"Diavion's first experience with death was her brother," Dickerson added.

Kyren and twin brother Jaylen were born premature on May 14, 2005, in New Orleans. Jaylen died five months later in Houston, where the family had relocated after Hurricane Katrina.

"Diavion was the big sister. When Jaylen died, it was so hard for her, trying to take care of her new little brother and trying to deal with the death of her brother," Dickerson explained.

But Diavion eventually got past that death and became a happy, at times precocious, kindergarten student at Resurrection of Our Lord Elementary School in New Orleans, her relatives said.

She wanted to be a cheerleader. She enjoyed cartwheels, flipping, jumping and dancing. And she loved her Yorkie puppy, J-J, which she had received for her birthday on Oct. 21.

J-J also died in Thursday's crash, relatives said.

Greta Walker, Candace Walker's mother, said her daughter is fighting for her life.

"She is not doing any worse, and she has little signs of moving in the right direction," Walker said. "If everything goes well, her first surgery will be on Monday."

She described her daughter, who worked at the Liberty Bank on Crowder Boulevard in New Orleans, as loving, charitable, outgoing and creative, with "a willing spirit."

"She would do it if no else was willing to do it. Family functions, if we had something going on, she would always spearhead it," her mother said.

Thinking again of Diavion, her grandmother remembered how "she constantly sang for no reason."

"She didn't mind singing loud, and people in the store would say, 'You have a singer on your hands.'"

Walker had bought her a karaoke machine for Christmas.

The Walker family is asking the community to help pay the funeral costs for Diavion and Kyren. A Candace Walker Memorial Fund account has been set up at Liberty Bank.

Staff writer Darran Simon contributed to this report.

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