

## MESQUITE/BALCH SPRINGS

# A driver lifeline, a mother's relief

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Where Julie Blasingame used to see tragedy, she now sees blessings.

Ms. Blasingame used to avoid the strip of LBJ Freeway near Military Parkway where her daughter Rachel was killed in a head-on collision after a pickup crossed the median.

"It was so hard to drive down to that place. ... It was so sad and depressing," Ms. Blasingame said. "It just terrified me to see that grassy median with nothing to separate those cars going 70 miles an hour."

A four-mile stretch of a Brifen wire-rope barrier between Military Parkway and Seagoville Road was dedicated June 23 — Rachel's birthday. It has helped lift the mother's grief and worry.

"When they actually started putting that barrier up, I started feeling relieved," she said, letting out a deep sigh. "And now I actually want to go down that strip of highway. I look at that barrier like a hawk."

The wire railing, which cost about a third less to build than traditional concrete barricades, was hit 10 times between May 2 and June 13.

"Every time that barrier gets hit, I feel like that's just Rachel's hand reaching down from heaven and just stopping those cars," Ms. Bla-

singame said.

After the May 2003 accident in which her daughter died, Ms. Blasingame began a crusade to erect some sort of wall to prevent similar crossover accidents along that stretch of highway.

With the help of Kaufman County Commissioner Ken Leonard, whose daughter Tabitha was critically injured in the accident, Ms. Blasingame met with officials from the Dallas office of the Texas Department of Transportation and persuaded them to join her cause.

"The standard had always been concrete barrier walls, and we were prepared to explain to her the process we'd have to go through to get one," said Transportation Department spokesman Mark Ball.

The likelihood of getting the state to agree to a concrete barrier was slim, he said, because that segment of highway was not among the deadliest and most in need of such measures.

"At the time, we didn't have the luxury of being able to do something at one-third the cost," Mr. Ball said.

But shortly before the scheduled meeting between Ms. Blasingame and state officials, the Transportation Department completed a test portion of Brifen barrier in Fort Worth.

With significantly lower construction and maintenance costs



**Rachel Blasingame (left) was killed in a crossover crash on LBJ near the Mesquite/Balch Springs line. Tabitha Leonard was critically injured.**

and shorter construction time than concrete barriers, Mr. Ball said the chances of getting a nod from the state were better.

"We told Ms. Blasingame ... 'If you'll talk it up — we'll do it,'" he said.

The Brifen system uses three wires that intertwine between posts and a fourth that runs through posts anchored 10½ feet apart. It has been shown to slow vehicles down enough upon impact to prevent crossovers.

The construction cost for the LBJ segment was about \$450,000, and roughly \$2,300 has been spent maintaining it after collisions.

"The posts just get picked up and put back into place, and 30 minutes later, an employee has the wire tightened and ready to go," Mr. Ball said.

None of the collisions along the