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TOP STORIES

Teen Averts Bus Tragedy Near Ruskin

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Aug 17, 2006, 23:18

RUSKIN – A 14-year-old Ruskin middle school student has been credited with averting a potential tragedy in the immediate aftermath of a collision between a Hillsborough County school bus and a dairy truck.

Mariela Hernandez, a student at Beth Shields Middle School, had just boarded the bus at her stop near U.S. 41. Just moments later as the bus turned around on the highway, a Velda Farms dairy truck slammed into the driver's side rendering school bus driver Theresa Dowd unconscious. The impact forced the bus into the northbound lanes of the highway.



Members of the Hillsborough County School District, the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office and Hillsborough Fire Rescue responded to an accident involving a school bus on U.S. 41 south of Ruskin on Aug. 11. Quick action taken by a student on the bus likely averted a significant tragedy. Mitch Traphagen Photo

The bus, however, continued to roll against the flow of traffic. Despite the pandemonium on the bus, Mariela stepped forward to the driver's seat to step on the brake and bring the bus to a stop. Her actions averted a potential disaster by preventing the bus from entering the median and possibly rolling or being involved in a head-on collision.

Her father, who had just walked her to the bus stop, witnessed the accident and ran towards the bus. Additionally, a Hillsborough County sheriff's deputy on his way to Manatee County was immediately on the scene and parked his patrol car in front of the bus as a warning to oncoming traffic. When the deputy entered the bus, Mariela removed her foot from the brake - which caused the bus to resume rolling and lightly bump the patrol car.

According to Hillsborough County Fire Rescue spokesman Ray Yeakley, nine students along with the drivers of both vehicles were transported to Manatee Memorial Hospital in Palmetto.

"None of the kids were serious," Yeakley said. "It was primarily just precautionary [in transporting them to the hospital]."

Yeakley also had praise for Mariela Hernandez.

"I've seen accidents involving Hartline buses and have never seen anybody step up and do something – and we're talking adults. Here we have a 14-year-old kid that has the presence of mind to jump up and do this. In my opinion, that was very heroic on her part."

Mariela was among the students transported to Manatee Memorial Hospital. She received seven stitches for a cut on her forehead. According to her mother, she also has pain in her jaw.

"When we did a u-turn the milk truck hit the bus," Mariela said. "That's when I hit my head. But when I got up, I ran up and hit the brakes. The driver was unconscious."

The bus had significant front end damage and showed signs of a direct collision in the immediate area of the driver's seat.

"The kids were in the back screaming and some were crying," she continued.

At least two windows near the back of the bus were broken, along with the windshield.

The school bus picks up students just off the southbound lanes of U.S. 41 at County Line Road. From that point, the bus essentially makes a u-turn to enter the northbound lanes for the trip to the school. It was apparently during that u-turn the bus was hit. According to Hernandez, the Velda Farms driver attempted to avoid the collision.

And it is the u-turn that concerns Mariela's father. Prior to attending Beth Shields, Mariela rode a Manatee County bus to school. That bus would pick up the children off the highway on County Line Rd., do a u-turn on a side road and then approach the highway straight to make the turn. He feels such an accident could possibly have been avoided had the bus performed that maneuver rather than the u-turn.

Additionally, the Manatee County bus had seat belts for the children, unlike the Hillsborough County bus serving that area.

A few days after the accident, Mariela, with a bandage covering her stitches, was apparently taking the attention she has received in stride. As a young woman who hopes one day to become a doctor, she has clearly shown the ability to act in an emergency. She does, however, prefer to ride to school with her parents for a while rather than take the bus.



Mariela Hernandez, 14, noticed the driver was rendered unconscious and ran to apply the brakes and bring the bus under control as it rolled south in the northbound lanes of U.S. 41. She was slightly injured in the accident and her action is being described as heroic. Mitch Traphagen Photo

And despite her modesty over what she had done, her time in the spotlight will continue for a while longer. On Tuesday, Mariela was scheduled to travel to Tampa for an interview with CBS News.

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