

SERIAL JUDICIARY
EXHIBIT NO. 6
DATE 1/31/09
CASE NO. SB186

Boy, 6, Misses Bus, Takes Mom's Car Instead

10-Mile Trip to Va. School Ends With Crash but Without Injury

By Tom Jackman
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The word "miracle" can be overused. But when a 6-year-old boy drives a Ford Taurus for more than 10 miles, weaving in and out of oncoming traffic, slams into a utility pole and no one gets hurt, well, maybe miracle is appropriate.

That's what happened on Virginia's Northern Neck on Monday morning, when the first-grader missed his school bus and decided to drive his mom's car to elementary school so he wouldn't miss breakfast and PE, authorities said yesterday.

"It's a miracle that somebody didn't get killed," said Northumberland County Sheriff Chuck Wilkins of the boy's drive along Northumberland Highway. "We're a rural area, but if we do have a rush hour, that's it."

The boy's parents were arrested and charged with felony child endangerment. Wilkins said the father, David E. Dodson, 40, was under a court order not to leave the 6-year-old and his 4-year-old brother alone with their mother, Jacquelyn D. Waltman, 26, at their home in the town of Wicomico Church. But Dodson left for work at 6:30 a.m., and Waltman was still asleep when the 6-year-old missed the bus and then drove off at 7:40 a.m. for Northumberland Elementary School, Wilkins said.

Sgt. Thomas A. Cunningham Jr. of the Virginia State Police said the boy is not particularly tall for his age and was "possibly standing" while driving the Taurus. Wilkins said the child had an idea about how to start, propel and steer the car from playing video games.

Once he got going, the boy navigated his way along Route 200 (Dupont Highway), across a bridge spanning the Great Wicomico River and then turned west on Northumberland Highway, which is about 140 miles from Washington. He made it through two intersections, Wilkins said, and then was "doing a pretty great rate of speed" as he passed cars on the two-lane road while not wearing a seat belt.

Other drivers noticed. Two people called the sheriff's office, one called the state police and at least one motorist "shouted at him to get off the road when he came to an intersection," Cunningham said.

The boy had gone 10.4 miles, the sheriff said, and was about a mile and a half from his school in Heathsville when he decided to cross the double line and pass again. But this time, he saw a tractor-trailer coming toward him in the other lane.

He quickly whipped the car back into his lane, but, unlike in video games, the car swerved out of control, skidded into an embankment and then struck a utility pole on the rear passenger side. Wilkins said the force of the impact cracked a wooden beam on top of the utility pole. The Taurus was severely damaged, if not totaled, Cunningham said.

Northumberland deputies Jeff VanLandingham and Roger Briney arrived first. "He was crying, hysterical," Briney said, "not from any pain -- he was just adrenalized up on fright." Briney said another motorist said she was driving 60 mph when the boy zoomed past her.

Briney said he unzipped the boy's coat to check for injuries, found none and zipped it back up -- and the boy turned and walked away. "I said, 'Where are you going?' " Briney said. "He said: 'My school's right over there. I'm late.' I said, 'We'll get you to school.' "

"He was just bound and determined," Wilkins said, "he did not want to miss breakfast and PE." The meal "may have been his primary goal," the sheriff said. The sheriff said the boy told him that he had trained on video games such as Grand Theft Auto and Monster Truck Jam.

The boy was taken to Rappahannock General Hospital, was released and was back in school for PE that afternoon. He was not identified because he is, well, 6. The boy and his brother were placed in foster care; his mother was in jail, officials said.

"We were just very blessed that it ended the way it did," said Theresa Larsen, assistant principal at the boy's school. Larsen said the school's principal, Arnette Butler, asked the boy, "What were you thinking?" He looked up and told her, "I just had to get to school."

Staff researcher Meg Smith contributed to this report.