ABSTRACT: A growing literature finds that wartime violence, crime victimization, and other harms can cause individuals to become more engaged in politics. Yet for victims, activism is costly: they tell and re-tell painful stories, face searing criticism, and work to exhaustion—all at one of the worst moments of their lives. So why do they do it? This manuscript explores the puzzle of victims’ political participation through ethnographic research with Families for Safe Streets, a group of victims-turned-activists in New York City. I argue that for some victims, politics offers unique ways of finding meaning in the losses they have suffered. Political participation allows victims to re-conceptualize their loss as a policy problem, rather than a random, inexplicable event. Additionally, victims often seek to change laws to prevent the same tragedies from recurring, and some victims see activism as essential to fulfill obligations to deceased relatives, their family, or their community.
On an October afternoon in Queens, NY, a young life was lost and a family of activists was born. Dashboard camera footage shows a small child in a crosswalk, holding her grandmother’s hand. Then suddenly, a black SUV whips into the frame. Shopping bags flail, and the grandmother falls backward as the child disappears under the vehicle, never to emerge again.

Before their daughter Allison was killed, Amy Tam-Liao and Hsi-Pei (HP) Liao were not particularly active in politics. But in the weeks, months, and years following Allison’s death, Amy and HP spoke at rallies and press conferences, met with elected officials, and joined with other victims of traffic violence to form a new advocacy organization, Families for Safe Streets. Working in collaboration with other activists, they embarked on a major city- and statewide lobbying campaign, and soon they had succeeded in lowering New York City’s default speed limit—no small feat in “a city that has long identified itself as sleepless and fast, aspiring to everything lickety-split” (Paumgarten 2014).

Amy and HP’s rapid transformation from grieving parents to sophisticated political actors may seem surprising, but their experience is consistent with a growing body of research in political science. Whether they have experienced wartime violence (Blattman 2009, Bellows and Miguel 2009, Bauer et al. 2016), crimes (Bateson 2012, Rojo Mendoza 2014), sexual violence (González and Traunmüller 2020), political repression (Lupu and Pesaikhin 2015), natural disasters (Sinclair, Hall, and Alvarez 2011), or serious illnesses (Jennings and
Andersen 2003, Crismon 2020), victims tend to be more politically active and civically engaged than their peers.¹

However, we still know relatively little about how and why victims choose to participate in politics. These questions matter because victims' participation is both consequential and puzzling. From survivors of mass shootings to the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo to the Me Too movement, victims-turned-activists wield significant influence in politics, both in the US and around the world. And whether they are running for office or lobbying for policy changes, victims' words and deeds carry special weight. More than abstract facts and statistics, personal stories shape policy decisions. And victims' stories are nothing if not compelling.² As activists, political operatives, and elected officials often observe, victims speak with a moral authority that no one can deny.³

Yet at the same time, victims' involvement in politics is hard to understand. Political scientists often suggest post-traumatic growth as the mechanism linking victimization and political participation (e.g. Blattman 2009, Bateson 2012). As articulated by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996), post-traumatic growth occurs in five domains: new possibilities, relating to others, personal strength, spiritual change, and appreciation of life. Post-traumatic growth theory is consistent with the idea that someone might turn to politics in the wake of tragedy, but simply invoking

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¹ Though see Córdova (2019) for important caveats to this finding.
² As Newman (2003) notes, victims' stories establish a connection with the story-teller, and they seem to offer solutions to avoidable problems. In addition, people process stories readily, and stories affect how we estimate probabilities (1426).
³ Fieldnotes, May 6, 2014.
post-traumatic growth theory does not fully explain the behavior of victims-turned-activists, for two reasons.

First, post-traumatic growth is very common, to the point that it would seem to over-predict participation in politics. Tedeschi estimates that between one-half and two-thirds of people who experience trauma will subsequently report post-traumatic growth (quoted in Collier 2016).\(^4\) Second, post-traumatic growth does not necessarily imply greater civic engagement or political participation. As Lowes, Carpenter, and Matthews (2020) note, post-traumatic growth does not map neatly onto specific preferences or behaviors; it can manifest in many different realms such as the arts, religion, and deepening relationships with friends and family.

Compared to these avenues for post-traumatic growth, political activism is difficult: it takes time, money, and energy, and it is often fraught with stress and conflict. Han (2009) argues persuasively that personal commitments and goals can move people to political action, even if they face considerable obstacles. But for victims of violence and other serious harms, the costs of advocacy are extraordinarily high. Victims-turned-activists tell and re-tell one of the most devastating experiences of their lives. They face stinging rebukes and deeply personal criticism. And perhaps worst of all, they come face-to-face with callous officials who don’t seem to care about the trauma they have experienced.

So why do some victims wade into the rough-and-tumble world of politics?

Based on ethnographic fieldwork with a group of victims-turned-activists in New

\(^4\)For example, a nationally representative survey found that more than 50% of US veterans report post-traumatic growth, a number that jumps to 70% among those diagnosed with PTSD (Tsai et al. 2014).
York City, this manuscript advances a new explanation for the relationship between victimization and political participation. Politics, I argue, offers victims unique ways of finding meaning in the tragedies they have suffered. Working interpretively, I identify three types of meaning-making that are only available to victims when they engage in political activism.

First, by participating in policy debates, victims re-frame their experiences as public policy problems—rendering their losses explicable and comprehensible, rather than random and meaningless. Second, by pushing for new legislation and policy changes, victims can feel that they are taking concrete action to prevent similar tragedies from recurring. Third, for some victims, political activism allows them to fulfill specific obligations. Some victims feel a duty to be good public representatives of and advocates for their families and communities. Others see political engagement as a means of fulfilling perceived obligations to deceased loved ones—living as they would have wished, honoring their values, or creating lasting social changes in their memories.

The manuscript begins by introducing the data, methodological approach, and case study context. Next, I investigate victims’ pathways to mobilization, highlighting three ways in which the experiences of the members of Families for Safe Streets diverge from common assumptions in the political science literature. Then I turn to the puzzle of victims’ participation, and I explore the unique ways that victims find meaning in politics.
Data and Methods

This manuscript is based on 18 months of intermittent ethnographic fieldwork with Families for Safe Streets, conducted while the organization was being established. The fieldwork included participant observation in New York City and Albany, NY, in-depth interviews with founding members of Families for Safe Streets, and reviews of printed and online materials, such as policy statements, lobbying schedules, and photos and videos of events.

An Interpretivist Approach

This project intentionally focuses on those victims who have become politically active; it is not a comparative study of participants and non-participants. Rather, I offer a rigorous exploration of the experiences and perspectives of those who choose to mobilize. While some political scientists might categorize this research design as 'selecting on the dependent variable,' it is appropriate and justifiable to focus on a group of people whose agency, perceptions, and beliefs are driving important political outcomes. Understanding these processes requires "evoking the intentionality of the actors" involved (Bevir and Rhodes 2015, 3). After all, political science is not just about "macro structures, large processes, or social institutions—but about people: living, breathing, flesh and blood, real people" (Shehata 2014, 209). And as Bevir and Rhodes write, "we can explain actions and practices properly only if we appeal to the reasons that inform them" (2015, 5). They continue,

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As Yanow explains, research is rigorous "to the extent that its arguments are constructed logically; that is, where conclusions are adequately supported by the evidence that is presented, such that the reader is persuaded by the cogency of the argument" (2014, 102).
Because actions and practices depend on the reasoned choices of people, they are products of decisions, not the determined outcomes of laws or given processes. After all, choices would not be choices if causal laws fixed their content. Political science has to recognize the inherent contingency of the objects it studies (5-6).

So while positivist studies may profitably use surveys or other large-N data to understand who, among a population of victims, is more likely to become politically active, that is not my goal here. Instead, I make a different contribution, providing a rare glimpse into the worldviews and motivations of those victims who do become politically active. Empirically, I pursue these aims through participant observation and in-depth interviews with the members of Families for Safe Streets.

**Participant Observation**

In interpretive research, participant observation is particularly valuable because it allows closer "access to participants’ experiences—of grief and fear, monotony and exhaustion, or solidarity and laughter" (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 65). Alongside the members of Families for Safe Streets, I conducted repeated, intensive bouts of participant observation at a series of discrete events, including rallies, press conferences, marches, lobbying days, community meetings, memorial-making exercises, and policy symposia. Each participant observation session lasted from 2 to 12 hours. I took brief jottings in the field and wrote up fieldnotes immediately afterward.

Although I am not a New Yorker, I am a cyclist, parent, and academic, and these aspects of my identity facilitated rapport during my fieldwork. Before or after events, I sometimes joined group members for meals or carpooled with them. These
moments of informal interaction were especially revealing, providing insights into the group’s dark humor and camaraderie.

The members of Families for Safe Streets were aware that I was a researcher interested in how and why victims become active in politics. I sought their affirmative consent before starting this project, and before attending specific events. But like Curry (2015, 211-212), I found it impractical to explicitly introduce myself to everyone I encountered in the field. So I opted for a middle-ground strategy, identifying myself as a researcher to non-group members—like lobbyists, journalists, and government officials—only when I had extended conversations with them. My participant observation was thus primarily but not completely overt, and it was situated toward the “researcher” end of the researcher-participant spectrum (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 63; see also Curry 2015, 15-16). Sometimes I pitched in with minor tasks, such as folding T-shirts, looking for an office on a map, or holding purses while group members spoke onstage. At other events, I was an actively engaged audience member: clapping, chanting, wearing yellow, and raising a flower when asked to do so. But I did not have any formal role within Families for Safe Streets, and I did not substantively intervene in the group’s activities or discussions.

Interviews

My participant observation research included hundreds of short conversations with group members, allied activists, elected officials, lobbyists, and
journalists. In addition, I conducted in-depth interviews with 17 founding members of Families for Safe Streets.6

Although interviewing is often framed as a stand-alone mode of data-gathering, the in-depth interviews for this project were deeply intertwined with my participant observation research. The participant observation equipped me with the contextual knowledge and interpersonal trust needed to elicit rich, detailed reflections. It also helped me perceive "meta-data" (Fujii 2010) and see "how individual comments fit together as parts of a more meaningful whole" (Soss 2014, 162).

The interviews were typically 1-2 hours, with breaks throughout. Most were conducted in quiet corners of public places, such as libraries, parks, and cafés; some took place in participants' homes. Most participants were interviewed alone, though several couples opted to be interviewed together.

The participants all provided written consent and consented to audio recording. Participants were given the choice of being identified with a pseudonym, a general descriptor ("a resident of Manhattan"), their full names, or another name of their choosing. They all decided to be identified with their full names, a choice I have respected here.

The interviews were open-ended, but they all touched on several core themes: prior involvement in politics and activism (if any), recruitment and mobilization, experiences with traffic safety advocacy, motivations for participating

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6 Unless otherwise indicated, all direct quotes in this manuscript are from interviews with members of Families for Safe Streets. Additional information about each interview is available in the appendix.
in politics, and challenges and rewards of participation. Drawing on my prior experience working with victims of violence, I intentionally did not ask about the details of specific crashes.

Although grief and loss are among the most sensitive subjects a researcher study, it is possible to conduct safe, ethical, constructive research with bereaved families (Hynson et al. 2006, 805). I established relationships with the participants prior to the interviews, and I approached the interviews with a posture of care and compassion (Ellis 2017). None of the participants became significantly distressed—perhaps because they already had experience speaking publicly about their ordeal, and an appropriate amount of time had passed since their loss or injury.7 In addition, bereaved individuals often find it beneficial to participate in in-depth interviews, because they are able to share their stories and reflect on their experiences (Dyregrov 2004, 391-2). To be sure, nearly all the interviews involved moments of crying by the participants, and sometimes me as well. But as Rosenblatt notes, there is a difference between having a deeply emotional conversation and causing harm (1995). Indeed, the participants' tears never seemed to reflect anxiety, panic, fear, or despair. Rather, they typically came when sharing fond memories of a deceased loved one, explaining perceived obligations to them, or reflecting on the need to prevent others from suffering a similar fate.

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7 Hynson et al. (2006) suggest interviewing bereaved families at least 6 months after a loss (808). The earliest interview for this project occurred at 10 months, and most were 1-3 years later.
Life and Death on the Streets of New York

New York is a city of pedestrians and, increasingly, cyclists. The sidewalks and bike lanes are a demographic jumble. Wearing stiletto heels, work boots, and everything in between, New Yorkers of all classes, races, genders, and political affiliations walk and bike together, jostling with heavy, fast-moving traffic. Navigating this vehicular obstacle course may feel like the quintessential New York experience, but it is a deadly dance. In New York City, drivers strike and kill an average of 100 to 200 pedestrians and cyclists each year. Even more are injured; in 2016, for example, more than 8,000 pedestrians sought care at New York City emergency rooms after they were hit by vehicles (City of New York 2022).

In recent decades, New Yorkers have vigorously demanded safer streets, and the city has emerged as a hub of pedestrian and cyclist advocacy and innovation. During the Bloomberg administration, Transportation Commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan vastly expanded New York’s network of bike lanes, installed pedestrian plazas throughout the city, and brought bike share to New York. The momentum intensified under Mayor Bill de Blasio. While still a mayoral candidate, de Blasio embraced “Vision Zero” as part of his platform. Vision Zero—which originated in Sweden—is a package of policy reforms and urban design strategies that seek to reduce pedestrian and cyclist fatalities to zero. Immediately upon de Blasio’s inauguration in early 2014, the new administration embarked on aggressive efforts

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8 This number may seem high, but it is consistent with collision data from the NYPD, which is reported monthly. In July 2022, the NYPD recorded 618 pedestrians injured by vehicles (City of New York Police Department 2022).

9 New York pioneered Vision Zero in the United States. Since 2014, a host of other major metro areas have adopted Vision Zero, including San Francisco, Boston, and Washington, DC.
to make Vision Zero a reality. Officials like Transportation Commissioner Polly Trottenberg allied themselves with the traffic safety activist community, including Transportation Alternatives (TA), which is the oldest, largest, and most professionalized pedestrian and cyclist advocacy organization in New York City.\(^{10}\)

Against the backdrop of this well-developed advocacy network, a new set of actors emerged in 2013 and 2014: the victims of traffic crashes. To be sure, some intrepid victims and their surviving relatives had previously spoken out about their experiences, but they had never coalesced into a movement. Eventually, these early activists “just tired out, really; it was a different moment in that time.”\(^{11}\)

By late 2013, the policy climate was different: TA’s growth and professionalization and de Blasio’s embrace of Vision Zero had created a “perfect storm” for traffic safety activism.\(^{12}\) So when tragedy struck the Liaos and several other families, they did something unprecedented: they banded together and became public advocates for traffic safety. By February 2014, this nascent group of victims-turned-activists had a name: Families for Safe Streets.

**Families for Safe Streets**

Families for Safe Streets was founded in 2014, but the group’s story really begins with the death of Carl Nacht in 2006. A tow truck struck and killed Carl while he was cycling on the West Side of Manhattan with his wife, Mary Beth Kelly. Carl

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\(^{10}\) TA was founded in 1973. TA currently has 28 staff and approximately 30,000 members and volunteers. The traffic safety community in New York also includes many other organizations, such as Right of Way, Streetsblog, StreetsPAC, and borough committees like Make Queens Safer and Make Brooklyn Safer.

\(^{11}\) Interview with Amy Cohen. Amy is describing the experience of a mother whose son was killed in 1997.

\(^{12}\) Multiple interviewees used this term to describe the unique policy and advocacy climate in 2013 and 2014.
and Mary Beth had been members of TA for 30 years, though they always saw cycling as a quality of life issue, not a political cause. As Mary Beth remembers,

I think I had a certain kind of calm about riding my bike everywhere, because it always worked. I rode in Boston, Philadelphia, New York. We went abroad, across Canada, throughout Europe. [Joining TA] was mainly about the vision of seeing places like Copenhagen or Amsterdam and wonderful pedestrian plazas – and Italy – and thinking, “Why can’t New York have these?” This is just, [it] adds to such a positive experience of life and community and health and pleasure. ... So, we became members [of TA]. But I was never really – you know, I was not active. It was more of: Put in the membership; support them because they worked towards making this city better for bicycling. But I was not active.

That all changed after Carl died. Within weeks, Mary Beth contacted TA and said, “I want to meet with you. I would like, you know – I think I’ve got something to offer.” To Mary Beth, “it seemed like I was almost, like, the first family member to approach them and say, ‘I want to work with you.’” TA was much smaller at the time, with about five full-time staff members. But they were receptive, and Mary Beth soon found her place in the TA community. She began speaking at press conferences, TA events, and city council hearings, all on behalf of measures to improve street safety.

Within a year, another member of TA was killed by a vehicle, and Mary Beth got in touch with his grieving family. This was the beginning of victim-to-victim organizing. As TA learned about other pedestrians and cyclists who had been injured and killed, the informal network grew, with Mary Beth as its central node.

In late 2013, the pace of organizing increased when several children were killed in quick succession. Just two days after Allison Liao’s death in October 2013, 12 year-old Sammy Cohen Eckstein was struck and killed by a van in Brooklyn, on the edge of Prospect Park. Almost immediately, Sammy’s family threw themselves into a blitz of outreach and advocacy. As the weeks passed, they found themselves in
touch with a wider network of sympathetic elected officials, advocacy organizations like TA, and other families who had lost relatives.

The Cohen Ecksteins happened to know one of the partners at the law firm hired by the Liaos, and the lawyers realized both families had recently lost children under eerily similar circumstances. So in November, Amy Tam-Liao’s lawyer gave her Amy Cohen’s phone number. “We were just both, like, in tears on the phone,” Amy Tam-Liao told me.

It was more of an emotional need at the beginning. We were just connecting with someone who understands what the hell we were feeling. And then out of that, as we learned more, I think, we found out how wrong the laws were in this situation. And then things happened from there.

Mary Beth, TA, and other traffic safety advocates connected the Liaos and the Cohen Ecksteins with more and more families, and soon an incipient organization was forming. The families demonstrated in support of Vision Zero at Bill de Blasio’s inauguration, and they held their founding meeting in early February 2014. About 35 people attended. Amy Cohen secured meeting space, and a professional facilitator helped the group set priorities.

Some attendees found that first meeting cathartic; others were overwhelmed by the grief in the room. As one participant told me, it was "as dark and depressing as a meeting could be. ... I mean, it was really grim. It was really bleak, and it was a lot of sadness to handle." Nonetheless, by the end of the meeting, the group had reached a consensus: there was a "unanimous vote that we all wanted to be an organization and keep going."13

13 Interview with Mary Beth Kelly.
So on Sunday, Feb. 23, 2014, nearly 200 family members, friends, and allied activists assembled on the steps of City Hall for Families for Safe Streets’ inaugural press conference. The day was unseasonably warm and sunny, but the mood was somber. Bearing photos of their loved ones, family members came forward to tell their stories. Tears flowed, both onstage and among the assembled journalists. In the weeks and months that followed, the members of Families for Safe Streets met with high-level public officials, testified at hearings, and advocated for the passage of numerous laws related to Vision Zero and traffic safety. Thanks to the hospitable policy climate and their strong alliance with TA, Families for Safe Streets leapfrogged over many of the obstacles that typically plague new grassroots organizations. Through TA, Families for Safe Streets was able to tap into a ready-made infrastructure; for example, they did not have to apply for nonprofit status, because they were able to raise funds as a program of TA.14

The relationship between Families for Safe Streets and TA is symbiotic, and it persists to the present day. TA staff members have longstanding, trusting relationships with several members of Families for Safe Streets, and the interests of the two groups are largely compatible. TA benefits from its relationship with Families for Safe Streets, because the family members bring an unparalleled moral authority to traffic safety advocacy, and their compelling personal stories cut across political cleavages. Meanwhile, the families benefit from their relationship with TA in many ways, both logistical and substantive. TA provides supplies for rallies,

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14 Interview with Lindsay Motlin.
secures permits to use particular streets or squares, connects family members with elected officials, and even hires lobbyists at crucial moments.\textsuperscript{15}

By March 2014, Families for Safe Streets was a major player in the fight to lower New York City’s default speed limit. City Council was already behind the effort, but it was still an uphill battle. New Yorkers walk fast, talk fast, and drive fast, and speed has long been romanticized as part of the city’s culture, identity, and allure. The speed limit campaign was also complicated by Albany’s control over New York City. State law sets 30 mph as the default speed limit in urban areas in the state of New York. To adopt a speed limit below 30 mph, New York City needed the approval of the Assembly and the Senate—meaning the issue was widely seen as yet another downstate vs. upstate power struggle.\textsuperscript{16} So for the spring and early summer of 2014, the members of Families for Safe Streets walked the halls of Albany, lobbying for New York City to be allowed to lower its speed limit. After much drama, the necessary bills cleared both houses in June, and on Nov. 7, 2014, New York City’s default speed limit dropped to 25 mph. Families for Safe Streets had scored their first major policy victory, and they rocketed to prominence as “a heroic club that no one wants to join” (Reeves 2014).

\textbf{Pathways to Participation}

Some of the members of Families for Safe Streets had limited prior experience with politics or community organizing, but none had ever been involved in an effort of this scale or intensity. In fact, several describe themselves as formerly

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{15} Although group members sometimes have minor disagreements with TA, they uniformly praised their leadership and assistance.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Interview with Aaron Charlop-Powers.
\end{itemize}
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clueless about politics. As Dana Lerner explained, before her son Cooper was struck and killed by a taxi,

I was the most apolitical person you've ever met. I was completely not involved in politics at all. I didn’t even know who the district attorney was. ... I voted for president, but I was never political at all.

So how do victims come to join an organization like Families for Safe Streets? Typically, socio-economic status, education, and other characteristics influence who is able to participate in politics. Indeed, most of the members of Families for Safe Streets have post-secondary education, and a critical mass of group members has flexible jobs that allow them to attend political events during the workweek, from pre-dawn roadtrips to Albany to midafternoon meetings at City Hall. The group members also speak English, and most have access to mental health treatment and medical care. These demographic and contextual factors surely affect which victims become active in politics, and who remains engaged over time. But my fieldwork also reveals processes of mobilization that diverge from those envisioned in the literature on victimization and participation, in three ways.

Social Networks and Relationships

The pathway from victimization to participation is often studied as an individual-level process. Yet victims’ decisions to participate in politics are intensely social and relational. Shortly after his son Sammy was killed, Gary Eckstein read

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17 I once provided Spanish-English interpreting for Belkys Rivera, and Belkys and I did her interview in Spanish. But like all the members of Families for Safe Streets, she also speaks English. In their interview, Amy Tam-Liao and HP Liao emphasized that their fluency in English has enabled them to become active in Families for Safe Streets, whereas it would’ve been very difficult for their own parents to do so, due to their limited English proficiency.

18 Cara Cancelmo particularly recognized the ways that her access to medical and mental health treatment allowed her to participate in politics after she was hit and seriously injured by a taxi.
about an upcoming city council hearing on traffic safety issues, and he was tentatively interested in going. He mentioned the idea to his teenage daughter, who was supportive. Then they talked to Amy, and after more deliberations, the entire Cohen Eckstein family ended up testifying at the hearing.19

During an initial foray into activism, feedback from others also influences whether victims continue participating. Their first events are often uncomfortable, either because of they are still in a state of shock, because the heaviness of others’ experiences is overwhelming, or because politics is unfamiliar. Small interactions at these first events matter. Dana Lerner remembers when her brother took her to her first meeting of Families for Safe Streets:

I just remember sitting there thinking, 'What am I doing?' Like, 'I don't want to be here, and why am I here, and what is going on?' I just remember sitting there, and just in tears the whole time. I just sat there in tears. But people came up to me. And I got a good feeling from the people there immediately, got a very good feeling. ... The people were just so welcoming.20

Similarly, the first time Lindsay Motlin signed up to speak at a town hall meeting, she was "freaking out."21 But her hot pink crutches drew the attention of her fellow audience members, and soon she found herself chatting with activists from Make Brooklyn Safer and allied groups. When she said she was nervous about making her statement, they said, "Oh, no, no, you have to." She did it, and she got immediate positive feedback from her newfound friends in the audience, as well as city councilmember Brad Lander,22 who live-tweeted her remarks.

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19 Interview with Amy Cohen and Gary Eckstein.
20 Interview with Dana Lerner.
21 Lindsay Motlin was seriously injured in a hit-and-run in Manhattan. At the time of the town hall, she was using crutches because she was recovering from her injuries.
22 Lander served on the New York City Council from 2010-2021. In 2021, he won election as the New York City Comptroller, and he took office in 2022.
Later, Lindsay’s friends and family reinforced her decision to get involved. One day, she went to a holiday party right after a Families for Safe Streets event, and she inadvertently still had her nametag on. At first she felt embarrassed, but then when she explained it was from a Families for Safe Streets meeting, her relatives said, "Oh my God, that’s so great that you’re doing it."

As Dorff (2017) and Ley (2022) observe, social networks affect victims’ political trajectories. For at least two families in Families for Safe Streets, pre-existing relationships with elected officials played important roles in facilitating their activism. In the Bronx, Belkys Rivera had known councilmember Ydanis Rodríguez for years. Ydanis was a friend of her late husband, and he knew her son Josbel. So when Josbel was killed in a hit-and-run, Ydanis was one of the first people to come to the family’s apartment. He helped Belkys navigate the legal system and introduced her to Families for Safe Streets. As Belkys explained,

Ydanis was there with us from the beginning; he never abandoned us. ... Ydanis helped me very much with everything that had to do with the accident, in the sense of getting mobilized, of what should be done and how to do it, for the investigation: communicating with the prosecutor, communicating with -- helping me so these laws get changed with the police. ... For example, he has invited me to a lot of meetings at City Hall with the group that is talking about Vision Zero; he invited me.24

In Brooklyn, meanwhile, the Cohen Ecksteins happened to attend the same synagogue as city councilmember Brad Lander. It’s a "teeny-tiny" place, so when Sammy was killed, Amy quickly found Brad’s personal email address. She contacted him, and Brad helped arrange for the Cohen Ecksteins to testify at their first hearing.

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23 Ydanis Rodríguez served on the New York City Council from 2010-2021, and he is now the city’s Transportation Commissioner.

24 Translated from Spanish by the author.
In addition, Amy’s mother had previously worked in state and federal politics. She put Amy and Gary in touch with a PR firm, and she arranged for meetings with elected officials like U.S. Rep. Caroline Maloney and New York State Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver.25

Geography mattered too. The Cohen Ecksteins live in a neighborhood "teeming with journalists and politicians,"26 and one day, Amy spotted US Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-NY) on the sidewalk. A truck barreled by at what seemed like 60 mph, and Amy turned to Schumer and screamed, "What are you going to do about this?!" Amy remembers, "He literally thought I was crazy. ... [But] I identified myself, and he gave me his card and said, 'Why don't you come in and meet with us?'"27

Recruitment

Like Amy Cohen and Gary Eckstein, some victims self-mobilize. They chase down elected officials, seek out meetings, and throw themselves into advocacy. When Lizi Rahman’s son Asif was killed riding his bike on Queens Boulevard (‘The Boulevard of Death’) in 2008, Lizi immediately wanted to contact elected officials and demand a bike lane for the notoriously dangerous street.28 But, she recalls, "I was not involved in politics, so I didn't know who to go [to], where to go, how to approach, who to approach, how to get it. So I kept asking people." One of Asif’s

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25 Sheldon Silver was the Speaker of the New York State Assembly from 1994 to 2015. He was subsequently convicted on federal corruption charges.
26 Interview with Amy Cohen.
27 The meeting with Schumer happened on Jan. 10, 2014 and is corroborated in Kleinfield (2014).
28 186 drivers, pedestrians, and cyclists were killed on Queens Boulevard between 1990 and 2017 (Schutz 2021).
friends connected her to a city councilmember, Hiram Monserrate. Lizi had an initial meeting with him, but months passed and nothing was happening. So Lizi redoubled her efforts, "writing emails to all the councilmembers, because somebody suggested that you should write."30

Even before Families for Safe Streets existed, Lizi was a one-woman outreach machine. But for other people, victimization brings unwanted attention. Media crews show up at their homes uninvited and politicians contact them—sometimes even asking to attend funerals.31 This involuntary public exposure can be unnerving. Aaron Charlop-Powers remembers that it was difficult to lose his mother "in a semi-public way. ... We were forced to be public about it in a certain way, and that wasn't on our terms, and it didn't feel good." So initially, Aaron and his family turned inward. They became more private out of a desire to protect our memories and our relationship with [our mother]. I didn't want to to share her with people who may have had agendas, or who we didn't really know.

At the time, TA honored the Charlop-Powers' family's desire for privacy. They "were great," Aaron remembers. "They were really supportive, they respected our decision not to do some sort of response or campaign or whatever [right away]." TA's

29 Hiram Monserrate served on the New York City Council from 2002-2008. He was subsequently elected to the New York State Senate, from which he was expelled in 2010, after he was convicted on domestic violence charges.
30 Lizi continued her email campaign for years, and her contact list expanded to include then-US Rep. Anthony Weiner, then-Mayor Michael Bloomberg, and Janette Sadik-Khan, who was New York's Transportation Commissioner at the time.
31 Amy Cohen, Gary Eckstein, and Belkys Rivera all had this experience.
32 Self-mobilization, encouragement from social and family networks, and recruitment can occur simultaneously. Immediately after her son Cooper's death, Dana Lerner started sending emails to anyone she could think of, trying to change how taxi drivers are licensed in New York City. At the same time, city councilmember Helen Rosenthal contacted Dana, and Dana benefitted from advice from her brother, who had previously studied Mothers Against Drunk Driving (Lerner 2017).
33 Interview Amy Tam-Liao and HP Liao.
approach built trust for the long-term—and eventually after careful, sustained outreach from Mary Beth and others in the TA community, Aaron and his sister Sarah both got more involved.

Just as outreach affects other forms of political engagement, such as voting or running for office, it can also influence who turns to politics in the wake of a tragedy. After she was seriously injured in a hit-and-run, for example, Lindsay Motlin did not particularly seek out information about Vision Zero or traffic safety advocacy in New York. Rather, it was "pushed in [her] face," as friends and relatives sent her a constant stream of news articles, even while she was still in the hospital. Similarly, although Dana Lerner does not typically like to join committees or organizations, her brother "really pushed" her to get involved with Families for Safe Streets.

For Judy Kottick and Ken Bandes, social networks led to outreach and assistance from TA and elected officials. Shortly after their daughter Ella was killed, a friend of a friend contacted their son on Facebook and put him in touch with a staff member at TA. Then TA introduced the family to city councilmember Diana Reyna, who arranged for Ken and Judy to attend their first community meeting.

Recruitment and mentoring from established activists was even more crucial to Greg Thompson, Jr.'s mobilization. Previously, Greg had always seen politics as a "totally different world:"

I had never imagined myself doing any of this at all, or even being asked to get involved. All this was strictly TV for me, like in terms of my interpretation of anything political, like it was all—those guys on TV are untouchable and I

34 Diana Reyna served on the New York City Council from 2002-2013. She later served as Brooklyn Deputy Borough President, and in 2022 she ran for Lieutenant Governor of New York.
35 Interview with Judy Kottick and Ken Bandes.
would never be able to even get in front of someplace like City Hall. It was more, that kind of stuff isn't real for people like me.

But after Greg's sister Renee was hit and killed by a tractor-trailer in Manhattan, organizers from TA repeatedly reached out to Greg and his family members. They invited Greg to press conferences. They encouraged him to try public speaking. They told him about meetings. They even included him in a "secret photo op" with Mayor-Elect Bill de Blasio. And over time, Greg began to feel more of a sense of agency and empowerment. Previously, he explained,

I felt like I had no voice in the way policies work within my neighborhood, within New York, within the world. But then I realized that if a certain number of people get together and they all aim for the same thing, ... you can get things done.36

_Ebbs and Flows_

Participation is not a binary yes/no decision; it's a choice that people continuously revisit and renegotiate. And participation does not necessarily increase monotonically over time. Rather, people dial their engagement up and down as their feelings and circumstances change.

Some people dive into politics right away. Multiple members of Families for Safe Streets described sending a flurry of emails to elected officials shortly after their loved one's death, or after they were injured.37 Others spent months on a listserv before going to their first meeting38 or decided to get involved after seeing that a similar tragedy happened again. Survivors of collisions need time to heal from

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36 Interview with Greg Thompson, Jr.
37 Interviews with Lizi Rahman and Dana Lerner.
38 Interview with Lindsay Motlin.
their injuries, and people whose relatives were killed may need time to process their loss.

Aaron Charlop-Powers recalls that his family simply didn’t "have the fortitude" to get involved right away; "the reality of [his mother's] killing and the pain and grief was overwhelming." Mary Beth Kelly agreed for some people it’s "just too raw" at first. Advocacy may not "fit within their ... sense of what they can do right now. [But] maybe they get more involved later on. People come to different things at different times." Reflecting on his experience, Aaron agreed. Sometimes things "go faster," and sometimes they "go slower," he told me. "Depending on how you’re feeling, it’ll change." At first, when Aaron would go to a TA event, he would "just get wiped out. I would just be sad for a week, because going to one of these things or talking to other people only made me sad." But over time, Aaron’s experiences, perspective, and level of involvement changed, and he became one of the group's most active participants.

Even once people start to get engaged, though, it is normal for participation to wax and wane through periods of burnout and renewal. By the end of Families for Safe Streets’ speed limit campaign, even the group’s most energetic members were exhausted. Aaron was doing "boatloads of email at night." Mary Beth would sometimes wake up at 3 am and remember she still needed to send more emails. The work "was really intense" and felt "difficult to sustain." The next section

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39 Cara Cancelmo recalled that she was "incapacitated" for several months after she was hit by a taxi on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.
explores why the members of Families for Safe Streets chose to get involved in politics, despite its considerable toll.

**The Puzzle of Victims' Participation**

Looming over downtown Albany, the Empire State Plaza is the seat of government for the State of New York. The vibe is Jetsons meets the Rust Belt: elevated highways soar around the Plaza, arcing between crumbling industrial buildings to deposit vehicles straight into the belly of the Death Star-like complex. When new arrivals emerge from their cars and buses, elevators whisk them into a tangle of poorly marked passageways. Slanted, uneven hallways and insider lingo make wayfinding all the more difficult. A visitor might be asked, "Are you going to The Egg, or to the LOB?"

Anyone would find it tiring to navigate the jargon and the mercilessly hard halls for hours on end, with little hope of food or rest. But when the members of Families for Safe Streets go lobbying in Albany, their days are especially draining. As Mary Beth Kelly explained, it's not just the "traipsing from office to office, seeing legislators." It's also the emotional toll. "You're telling your story again and again; you're hearing each other's stories. You just feel that raw pain, and it just wipes you out." After all, when victims meet with legislators, organize press conferences, or testify at hearings, they are not just preparing for high-stakes events or experiencing typical anxiety about public speaking. They are sharing one of the

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40 This description draws on my fieldnotes from daylong visits to the Empire State Plaza on March 18, 2014 and May 6, 2014, as well as an interview with Sarah Charlop-Powers.
41 Interview with Mary Beth Kelly. Offering a dissenting view, Cara Cancelmo explained that she doesn't find advocacy particularly stressful, because the crash and her injuries are "so present to me that it feels far more honest to be having a conversation about this than it does to be having a conversation about anything else."
worst experiences of their life, while running the risk that they or their loved one could be blamed for their own injury or death. Judy Kottick and Ken Bandes remembered the first community meeting they attended after their daughter, Ella Bandes, was struck and killed by a bus on the border of Queens and Brooklyn. The police spoke, and they

only talked about people walking across the street with their headphones and looking at their phones. They basically blamed her. ... And she wasn’t on her phone! ... [The police] were really hostile, and not nice at all. ... Not one person [from the police] said, "I’m so sorry for your loss." Not one! They were just defensive and hostile. So it was hard.

When victims come face-to-face with incompetent or indifferent officials, it feels very personal. Dana Lerner recalls that when she testified before the Taxi and Limousine Commission (TLC), "some of the comments that the commissioners made were so appalling to me. And they were so ignorant. I couldn’t believe the ignorance of these people." One commissioner who is a lawyer did not even seem to know basic traffic laws, which "really, really upset me very much. ... I was furious. And I was like, who are these people who are voting? I was devastated after I went to that meeting." And as Aaron Charlop-Powers explained, when you see that someone is "visibly disinterested," it’s very difficult to share a "gut-wrenching story."

Some people just flat-out don’t care. And that’s really hard, and that tries your patience, because you feel like saying to them, ‘Look, just do something. This is within your power.’

These interactions are viscerally frustrating, as I experienced repeatedly on lobbying trips to Albany. In one instance, I waited in a legislator’s anteroom while

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42 Interview with Lindsay Motlin.
43 Interview with Aaron Charlop-Powers.
the Families for Safe Streets delegation went in for their meeting. Words began to float out of the meeting, the tone and content completely out of synch with the mundane dental-office-like surroundings. "Killed." "Run over." Voices rose. The pleading became anxious and frustrated. Yet the official’s responses were terse and guarded. Soon the group poured out, emotions exploding in the hallway. "He doesn’t fucking support 20 mph!" Their ask seemed both obvious and urgent, and yet he’d said no. The group was incredulous: after all their preparation, and after a heart-poundingly tense conversation, they’d gotten nowhere.\(^{44}\)

Why would anyone choose to put themself in these kinds of situations? It is certainly true that advocacy gives the members of Families for Safe Streets a way of keeping busy, and they benefit from social support among the group members. Their work also involves an element of memorialization; they carry photos of their deceased relatives, share their quirks and passions, and seek acknowledgment that they lived, died, and mattered. However, there are many other, less conflictual ways to pursue these goals. And indeed, the members of Families for Safe Streets are involved in the arts, their religious communities, the legal system, and counseling and bereavement support groups\(^{45}\)—but they also participate in Families for Safe Streets precisely because it is political.

Amy Tam-Liao remembers that after her daughter Allison was killed, she Googled to see how parents memorialize their children. She learned that people

\(^{44}\) Fieldnotes, March 18, 2014.

\(^{45}\) For instance, Lizi Rahman organized a memorial for her son Asif at a local school, staged exhibition of his photos, organized performances by his friends, and distributed booklets of his poetry. She also published a book of Asif’s writings and drawings.
build libraries at their child’s school or plant a tree—and it just didn’t seem like enough. She was looking for something more; something different. Likewise, Sarah Charlop-Powers was drawn to Families for Safe Streets precisely because it is not a support group; it’s focused on concrete action.

In addition, several group members draw connections between post-traumatic growth and their involvement in Families for Safe Streets. Some were previously aware of post-traumatic growth theory because they work in counseling, psychology, or social services. Others learned about it in other ways. For example, after listing several reasons why she participates in Families for Safe Streets, Lindsay Motlin told me, "Also, I'm aware that when you go through something really bad, it's psychologically helpful to make something good of it. So that's part of it." I followed up by asking, "Was that, like, advice that you had gotten, or just kind of intuition, or ... ?" Lindsay replied that years before, a different experience had prompted her to read the Wikipedia entry on post-traumatic growth. When she was recovering from the hit-and-run, she thought back to that Wikipedia page and saw how post-traumatic growth could apply to her situation.

Yet post-traumatic growth does not fully explain why victims turn to politics—particularly given the travails inherent in political activism. But these costs are paired with unique benefits: things they can’t get through other, less taxing avenues. For the members of Families for Safe Streets, these benefits center around three types of meaning-making.

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46 Interview with Amy Tam-Liao and HP Liao.
47 Interview with Sarah Charlop-Powers.
Policy Context

Political advocacy is not just about passing laws and supporting candidates; it is also a process of growth and learning. Before they were personally affected by crashes, most of the members of Families for Safe Streets had never given any serious thought to street design or traffic safety laws. As Mary Beth Kelly observes, most people do not follow these issues closely—"and until this happened to us, we didn't either!" Judy Kottick agreed, as she recalled her old perspective: "You hear, 'Oh, someone got hit by a bus. How horrible.' But I never paid attention. I had no clue what a widespread problem was."

Through their activism, however, the members of Families for Safe Streets have become self-taught experts. They conduct research, share articles, and compile statistics, striving to equip themselves to make the most compelling arguments possible to elected officials and to the public. Their advocacy also places them in meetings where they hear reports from engineers, listen to expert testimony, and see street design proposals.

In November 2014, for example, the members of Families for Safe Streets co-sponsored the 2014 Vision Zero for Cities Symposium. Throughout the large, wood-paneled lecture hall at Brooklyn Law School, heads snapped to attention when group members took the stage to share their stories. But the members of Families for Safe Streets were not just there to speak; they were also there to listen. As they watched presentations, participated in breakout sessions, and mingled with academics, engineers, and policy-makers, their notepads quickly filled with
diagrams of intersections, lessons from Sweden, and the latest updates from the de Blasio administration, punctuated with emphatic circling and underlining.\textsuperscript{48}

Marinating in these policy discussions changes the way victims understand their own experiences. As talk of pain and loss is displaced by debates about S1 Gards, Barnes Dance crossings, and taxi driver licensing requirements, the members of Families for Safe Streets construct new causal stories and see that crashes are not just random, unpredictable accidents; rather, they are "caused by human actions and amenable to human intervention" (Stone 1989, 281). For instance, Sarah Charlop-Powers finds her experiences with Families for Safe Streets fulfilling because the group is action-oriented, with "a specific goal of policy change." That sense of purpose helps people see beyond their grief; "they're part of something that is structured, and they are showing up, and somebody has got a game plan. ... I think it increases people's sense of confidence about what they're doing, which is worth a lot."

Policy discussions also help victims situate their experiences as part of a broader pattern. Dana Lerner remembers realizing, "This happens. This has happened to other people. Other people have gone through this." Similarly, Cara Cancelmo initially saw being hit by a car as \textit{sui generis}. But once she got involved in advocacy work, "it became an, 'oh, this happens all the time, all over the place' kind of thing."

For Ken Bandes, meanwhile, a major shift occurred at a press conference with Mayor-Elect Bill de Blasio:

\textsuperscript{48} Fieldnotes, Nov. 14, 2014.
That was sort of the first time, somehow, that the concept or that whole Vision Zero thing sort of started to make it feel like this is not some unbelievably horribly freak out of the blue thing, but this is an actual social issue that can be addressed in a social way, and I think that made a big difference. To my mind, it made a big difference.

In the framework of Stone (1989), Ken had begun to reimagine traffic violence as a social problem, rather than a natural occurrence—shifting it from "the realm of fate and accident," to "the realm of control and intent" (283). This new understanding flowed from and reinforced Ken's nascent activism, and it mattered greatly to him.

Concluding his interview, Ken emphasized that once he realized the crash that killed his daughter was just one instance of a wider problem, that made him feel a little less helpless. And it makes the whole thing just seem a little less, you know, just like unbelievably freakish bad luck. It just puts it in a slightly different context of ...[a] social issue, and that is a little easier to bear in some ways. You don't feel so alone in it, and it's not so random.

Never Again

As Woliver (1993) argues, anger and outrage can be powerful catalysts for action (though see Milliff 2021). And when victims channel their emotions into politics, they often seek to ensure that the same tragedy never befalls anyone else again.

Cara Cancelmo remembers the day she came home, and her parents told her that a child, Cooper Stock, had been killed by a taxi. The crash happened at 97th St. and West End Ave., just a few blocks from the location where Cara had been hit by a taxi the year before. Cara had already wanted to take a more active role in street safety advocacy; over the past year she had been sending "emails to random politicians, like, 'Can I work in your office?' Just trying to find something, some way to be involved." But nothing came of it. Then when Cooper was killed, Cara felt she
hadn't done enough. "I just felt like, great, I waited a year, and this happened." So she sent a letter to Cooper's family, and she vowed to get more involved—a promise she kept.49

Cara's experience was difficult, but not anomalous. New York City is a dense place, where even relatively rare events happen with some frequency and in close proximity. Aaron Charlop-Powers recalls that he finally got more involved when he saw crashes happening over and over again

in succession, like, multiple people were killed in a matter of days. And that felt really crazy to me. So I felt, at minimum, I would go out to this [Families for Safe Streets] meeting and see what was going on.

The steady drumbeat of crashes also catalyzed Lindsay Motlin's participation. "You don't want to this to happen to other people," she told me. But "it just keeps happening, so I feel responsible to, like, be part of the movement." Even more emphatically, Dana Lerner explained,

Every time I hear about another child who was killed, particularly by a taxi driver, I can’t describe to you the agony that I feel. And I feel – I know this is a little irrational – I feel partially responsible. I feel like I should have done more, I'm not doing enough, this shouldn’t happen again.

Faced with this implicit sense of duty, it makes sense that victims would turn to the politics to attempt to change laws and policies.

Furthermore, fighting to help others creates a sense of meaning around a loved one's death or one's own injury. Many of my interviewees explicitly rejected

49 Dana Lerner, Cooper's mother, responded to Cara's letter. With assistance from Dana, Cara quickly became more networked in the New York traffic safety community. She joined Families for Safe Streets, spoke at events, lobbied in Albany until the wee hours of the night, advised city councilmember Helen Rosenthal about Vision Zero, and worked to help pass Cooper's Law, which imposes penalties on taxi drivers who injure or kill pedestrians. (Interviews with Cara Cancelmo and Dana Lerner.)
the notion that everything happens for a reason, and I never heard anyone so much as hint that subsequent policy changes justified, absolved, or rectified their injury or their loved one’s death. But both Lindsay Motlin and Cara Cancelmo said they try to use their new perspective to help others. And for people whose relatives were killed, working to prevent harm to others is a way of imbuing a tragic event with a note of hope. As Lizi Rahman explains, "when Asif was alive, he used to help people in many ways." After Asif was killed while cycling on Queens Boulevard,

I said if we get a bike lane, it will be his way of helping other people. ... A bike lane is going to help save lives. ... We have to have it, the rules in place for all the travelers, bikers, pedestrians, car drivers, everybody. So I want to see it done before I die, I'm really telling you that.50

Whether through named laws (such as Cooper's Law and Sammy's Law) or specific policy initiatives, many bereaved family members get involved in politics in order to help others in the wake of their own loss. In effect, they are writing a new ending to one of the worst chapters of their lives—and often, it works.

For Mary Beth Kelly, activism provided her with a renewed sense of optimism amidst death and devastation. After her husband Carl was killed, she realized, "I could influence whether or not this happens to other people." That was "energizing" for her. And as pedestrian deaths dropped in the years after New York adopted Vision Zero, Mary Beth saw,

50 Lizi Rahman got her wish. In November 2021, the city finished construction on a new bike lane on Queens Boulevard. Lizi attended the dedication, carrying a photo of Asif. State Sen. John Liu recognized Asif in his remarks: "Many years after Asif Rahman was killed on Queens Boulevard, cementing its notoriety as the Boulevard of Death, the grief and pain is still felt by his family and community. We honor his memory with the completion of this bike lane, an important milestone in the continuing transformation of Queens Boulevard into a boulevard of life" (quoted in Parrott 2021).
That's people alive today that wouldn't be! That's families that would be suffering like ours did ... Prevention isn't sexy. You know? Prevention is dull and quiet and goes unnoticed. But that's what we want. We want people to be able to live full lives, not get cut down as 12 year-olds, or even a 56 year-old in the prime of his life. It's wrong. And if there's something you could do to prevent it? And then you're part of that? And you feel like you helped make that happen? There's something that's incredibly satisfying about that. It's like, 'Okay, I made a little contribution to this world. I made it a little better.'

*Fulfilling Obligations*

Echoing Wood's (2003) concept of pleasure in agency, the members of Families for Safe Streets sometimes marvel at the leadership and initiative that they've been able to undertake, asserting themselves in spaces that were previously closed to them. But beyond this personal growth, the members of Families for Safe Streets also understand their work as fulfilling important obligations to others.

Some group members told me that in the wake of the crash that affected them, they felt obliged to be good public representatives of their families, neighborhoods, and racial and ethnic communities. For Amy Tam-Liao and HP Liao, their shared identity as Chinese-Americans shapes their involvement. "One of the reasons we keep going, sometimes, is there's not a lot of people of color in Families for Safe Streets," HP told me. Although there are some members who are Japanese-American, Black, Latinx, and Bangladeshi, HP and Amy are

the only Chinese family. So in some ways we feel like we're that voice for the Asian community that's not being represented. ... We need to pull our own weight, not just we're part of Families for Safe Streets, we're representing a certain group or ethnicity, and we're pulling in that group within the community too.

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51 Interviews with Dana Lerner, Lizi Rahman, Judy Kottick, Ken Bandes, and Greg Thompson, Jr.
Amy explained that they feel "a bit of pressure" to make sure they’re representing their community well. "And also there’s the pressure of: if we stop [participating], it also means it stops being talked about in the [Chinese] newspaper."

Similarly, Greg Thompson, Jr., who is Black, felt a responsibility to represent his "sister and the rest of his family properly." He was acutely aware people would look at me and use me as a reference for what my family is, who they are, how they may have raised me, or just in general. And it’s like I’m aware of those judgements and how they come about.

Later, Greg returned to a similar theme:

Especially where we come from, you know what I mean? We’re definitely not from the most extravagant environment. I mean, I grew up—I’ve been robbed twice in broad daylight. And my parents, like, did their best always. They did a very good job. And growing up with decent people, you want to make sure that you’re representing them decently. I was given the opportunity to represent them decently in a very public way, and in a very proactive political way. So I intended to do that.

At the same time, Greg also decided to participate as a means of living out the legacy of his deceased sister, Renee. When Greg was first invited to join a press conference, he was "caught off guard:"

Then I remember thinking Renee was like super into that sort of thing. If you wanted to find the most technically-inclined person in the family as far as politics goes, Renee would be that person. She had all of the jargon down. I don't even know why she was into it like that, because she was 16. But it definitely wasn’t me. I was the computer guy in the family. But I kept thinking about that sort of thing. I was like, if Renee were here she would try to involve herself because this is a chance to make an impact. So she was the kind of person -- I think eventually she would have been involved with something like [this]. So I kept on thinking that. ... It’s like I’m here, it’s like I’m living for her, to represent what she may have been, and I’m representing my family.

Echoing similar themes, Aaron Charlop-Powers noted that activism is especially meaningful for him because his mother was a community organizer in the Bronx.
After she was killed, a street was dedicated to her; it is called 'Meg Charlop Way.' His voice heavy with emotion, Aaron told me that he has been thinking about that wording, because "for me this work has been about trying to connect to my mom's legacy. I try to make her proud by doing things her way." Part of that, for Aaron, is knowing that even if it's hard,

there's valor and there's meaning in identifying something you stand for, and putting in time to try to see that thing happen. And so my involvement with this group has been an opportunity for me to wrestle with that inner conversation and feel like I'm being productive and processing away from the darker sort of doomsday, pessimistic way of looking at the world, and trying to be in the world in a way that I believe my mom lived, and frankly I believe that she would want me to live [crying].

Judy Kottick also explained that her activism allows her to live out the wishes of her daughter, Ella. Through tears, she elaborated:

Ella really had so many goals. She wanted to make a difference in the world. I mean that was her goal, and she would have also done it in a very quiet way. She was not—she was very shy and not someone who liked attention, but she was determined, and she was a researcher. She wanted to do research on how to bring interventions to underserved populations. And so I kind of feel like I’m doing this for her. You know? This wasn’t the way she wanted to change the world, but it’s all we have, so it makes me feel like I’m carrying her with me. She would be proud of us.

**Conclusion**

In the years since Families for Safe Streets was founded in New York City, the organization has expanded across North America. As of 2022, there are chapters in cities from San Diego to Washington, DC. and from Nashville to Toronto. Back in New York, many of the group's founding members remain active: they continue holding press conferences, collaborating with TA and city officials, and going on
lobbying trips to Albany, all in the name of improving safety for pedestrians and cyclists in the city.\(^{52}\)

Why has Families for Safe Streets persisted and succeeded, while so many activist groups flounder and fail? To be sure, it is hard for political leaders to ignore any group of victims-turned-activists, because brushing them off is tantamount to saying, "I don't care about your loss."\(^{53}\) But as Cara Cancelmo observed, the relatively non-partisan nature of Families for Safe Streets' advocacy also matters:

We really do have a moral authority, in the sense [that] we have mothers holding up pictures of their dead children, about something that's not controversial. It's not gun violence. It's just: cross the street, and do it safely. It's something that's so—you can't argue with it. You can't be like, "No, I don't want to make the street safer." That doesn't look good for you, as whatever [kind of] politician you are. [\textit{Shared laughter}] So I think that helps our cause.

At the same time, activism can be a means for victims to reassert their dignity and agency (Stewart 2008, 234), and the rewards of expressive participation can make this type of activism self-perpetuating. Families for Safe Streets also exemplifies Han, Campbell, and McKenna's (2022) theory of civic feedbacks: the organization has simultaneously developed its constituents' capacities, recruited and retained members, and cultivated elite relationships, laying the groundwork for sustained political relevance and policy influence.

In this manuscript, I use ethnographic research with the members of Families for Safe Streets to generate fresh insights into victims' pathways to mobilization and their motivations for pursuing political activism. Despite the costs it entails, I argue

\(^{52}\) For a comprehensive update on Families for Safe Streets' latest efforts, see Kim (2022).

\(^{53}\) Interview with Sarah Charlop-Powers.
that politics can provide victims with unique ways of finding meaning in the losses they have suffered.

These specific types of meaning-making are not available through other channels, nor does the process of finding meaning have a clear end point. Rather, it is ruminative and indefinite. There is always more to do: more lives to save, more questions to grapple with, more ways to live out the hopes and dreams of those who were lost. Victims often see their advocacy less as a choice, than an imperative. The policy changes they seek feel urgent and essential, and the narratives they construct are vital to their own well-being—for as Joan Didion once wrote, "we tell ourselves stories in order to live" (1979, 1).

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54 As Ed Yong writes of activism by long COVID patients in the US, "Their symptoms often keep them depleted physically and mentally, but although this work only adds to their strain, they feel they have no choice but to do it" (2022).
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