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PERSPECTIVE

## Life's poetic response to tragedy realized

By Jonathan Michaels

On Nov. 30, 2013, 40-year-old Hollywood sensation Paul Walker died tragically, when the Porsche Carrera GT his friend was driving crashed in horrific fashion on the public-street racecourse they had created. Walker is best remembered for his leading role in "The Fast & Furious" franchise — a series of hit movies that began in 2001 and, ironically, center around the subculture of illegal street racing.

At the time of his death, Walker was in the middle of filming the seventh installment in the franchise, "Furious 7," and questions immediately surfaced about whether the movie could continue in his absence. The issue was sensitive, and one not easily balanced, as family, friends and fans were grieving from the loss, while Universal Pictures, the studio that owns the franchise, was in the throws of full production. And to complicate it, few could understand how the accident happened, and who should be held responsible for causing it.

The loop in the industrial park where Walker crashed his car was called "Hercules cure," named by the Santa Clarita locals who raced the illegal circuit on weekends, when most of the neighboring businesses were closed. Walker owned a high performance automobile business in the park with his long-time friend Roger Rodas, called Always Evolving. On the day in question, Walker and Rodas were hosting a fundraiser for Walker's charity, Reach Out Worldwide.

Walker and Rodas were both experienced racecar drivers, and were intimately familiar with the loop, so nothing should have gone wrong. Yet life sometimes cheats even the best performers. Rodas had asked Walker to go for a ride in his 2005 Porsche Carrera GT — a \$450,000 supercar with 612 horsepower that Porsche describes as being "as close to a racecar as we will ever get." Walker, who had publicly said that one of his biggest frustrations in life was not crossing the 200-mile-per-hour barrier (he had only made it to 197), was happy to oblige.

Shortly after Walker and Rodas left, the fundraiser was interrupted by an explosion that was

heard around the world. Rodas had lost control of the Carrera GT on a sweeping turn and crashed into a light pole, causing the car to burst into flames and all but disintegrate. Horrified party-goers rushed to the scene, and tragically, Rodas' 8-year-old son tried to rescue his father from the burning wreckage. Walker is survived by a 15-year-old daughter. No child should ever have to endure such travesty.

The investigation by the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department concluded that the Porsche was traveling up to 94 mph in a 45 mph zone when Rodas lost control. And with this, a firestorm of litigation ensued. Kristine Rodas, widow of Rodas, filed a lawsuit against Porsche North America, claiming that the vehicle's defective suspension caused the accident, and that the race-ready vehicle should have had a crash cage and fuel cell, both of which would have mitigated against death in the crash.

Porsche has been sued before for high-speed death claims relating to its Carrera GT supercar, the most famous of which occurred when a driver lost control of the car at 145 mph on a Southern California racetrack. In that case, Porsche participated in the \$4.5 million global settlement.

Separately, Walker's family sued Rodas' estate for its refusal to return the actor's vehicles. According to the lawsuit filed in the Los Angeles County Superior Court, Rodas was in possession of 17 cars that were owned fully or partially by Walker, and that Rodas' family is refusing to give up the vehicles.

The largest question, however, centered on what would become of "The Fast & Furious" franchise, and more specifically, the production of "Furious 7," which was left with half of a film shot and no leading actor. And the question was not of idle significance. As of the time of Walker's death, the franchise had grossed \$2.5 billion worldwide, making it Universal's largest franchise of all time — eclipsing the studio's greats like "Jurassic Park," "Jaws" and "E.T."

With production delays averaging about \$250,000 per day, the cost of suspending the film promised to become astronomical. Ultimately, after considerable rewrites, Universal used Walker's younger brothers, Cody (26) and Caleb (37), as stand-ins to complete his remaining scenes. After a four-month break and \$50 million in production delays, filming resumed in April 2014 and concluded three months later. With its original production budget of \$200 million and the \$50 million delay, "Furious 7" has become the



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Vin Diesel arrives at the premiere of "Furious 7" at the TCL Chinese Theatre, April 1, in Los Angeles.

sixth most expensive movie of all time.

Most movie studios purchase film production insurance, policies that are designed to cover unforeseen production problems, such as the death or injury to an actor, and Universal was no exception. Fireman's Fund placed the policy for "Furious 7," and will likely be required to pay the entire \$50 million production delay — making it the most expensive insurance claim in Hollywood history. The prior high was \$20 million when John Candy died during the filming of "Wagons East!" in 1994.

The work done to salvage the film paid off in spades. "Furious 7" opened this past weekend, exceeding all expectations. Industry analysts expected a robust opening of \$115 million, but no one could have anticipated the record-breaking \$143.6 million the movie grossed, making it the highest-grossing debut for a film in the month of April of all time. Combined with the \$240.4 million the film grossed overseas, "Furious 7" brought in a total \$384 million in just *three days*.

The movie's record-setting debut is life's poetic response to tragedy realized. It would have been stunning to have the film completed with any degree of success; record-setting numbers are just beyond words. Tragedy strikes in the most unexpected ways, whether self-inflicted or random accident, often taking with it those who we could never imagine living without. We have wept the loss of James Dean, Kurt Cobain, John Lennon and many more whose talents and charisma have resonated in our souls.

Now Paul Walker is added to the list. But if we mourn, let it be for ourselves and not for him, as he was living his passion until the very end. As he famously said before his untimely death, "If one day the speed kills me, do not cry because I was smiling." Rest in peace Paul Walker.



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