

# Too many cyclists are dying

CHARLES KOMANOFF

**F**IRST THE father. Then his daughter. Both riding bicycles. Both struck and nearly killed by drivers who disregarded their clear right of way.

What do these incidents, and a dozen like them every day in New York City, say about our streets? When exactly did we decide that only drivers have the right to use them?

The father is Barry Benepe, urban visionary and founder of the Greenmarket program that brings the fresh harvest of regional farms and fisheries into open-air markets across the city.

On a brisk March day in 1987, Barry, then 58, was riding his bike in the West Village when a delivery van ran a red light and broadsided him. He spent six days in the hospital.

The daughter is Jennifer Benepe, Barry's only girl among five children, an M.B.A. working at a dot-com. Now 41, she cycles to work, races in an amateur league and rides upstate on weekends.

Last month, on President's Day, Jennifer was cycling up Riverside Drive toward the George Washington Bridge when a southbound car hung a sudden left without signaling and hit her head-on. The driver said he "didn't see her," although Jennifer was brightly attired and in plain sight.

She spent 13 hours in the emergency trauma unit with deep head and rib bruises and a severely gouged groin.

In the past few years, motor vehicles have injured 4,000 cyclists a year in New York City and killed an average of 15 to 20.

But last year, 35 cyclists — the most on record — were killed, an enormous increase.

The police — as usual — blame the cyclists. Police officials said last month that three-fourths of the cy-

clists killed in the past two years died because of their own "unsafe operation."

Yet the police accident reports tell a different story. In well over half the cases, the cyclist would be alive if the driver had obeyed the law.

New York City cyclists long ago got used to the fact that the police don't stop or cite drivers for violating cyclists' right of way, or even for knocking them down. Yet most cyclists surely would have thought that if the rate of cyclist killings were suddenly to double, the police would search for solutions.

Forget about it. The NYPD prefers to hide behind its blame-the-victim routine.

Last month, Mayor Giuliani correctly blamed reckless driving for the upsurge in cyclist and pedestrian deaths.

"We have too many people driving aggressively in the City of New York," Giuliani declared, announcing that police would stop reckless drivers and confiscate their vehicles.

But so far, only highway driving has been targeted. Police sources say there is no plan to protect cyclists and pedestrians on city streets.

Barry Benepe still rides on quiet upstate roads, but after

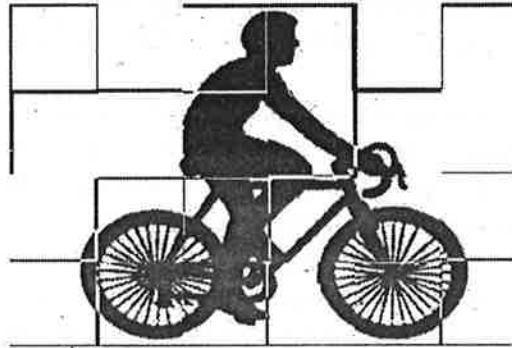
his crash he gave up cycling in town.

Jennifer Benepe expects to ride again, and soon. Through her constant pain, she insists that the worst thing about being hit is missing the freedom of biking.

In the teeth of official indifference and driver aggression, 100,000 or more New Yorkers bicycle every day — all kinds of people riding for all kinds of reasons. Like all citizens, they deserve to be protected from thuggery and violence.

If cycling weren't such a struggle, perhaps you might consider riding, too — or your father or your daughter. Lots of people would. That would be good for them — and for everyone.

Komanoff heads *Right of Way*, a pedestrian-rights organization.



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