

# WASTED

## Despite record lawsuit, little girl pays ultimate price for Giants Stadium's 'culture of intoxication'

BY WAYNE COFFEY

**S**OMETIME IN THE NEXT few weeks, 7-year-old Antonia Verni will wheel into Mrs. Tufford's classroom in School No. 6 on Oakdene Ave. in Cliffside Park, N.J. For the moment, at least, it will mean that she won't be the focal point of heart-rending headlines and historic verdicts, and that her primary identity won't be as the victim of a drunken carpenter who got wasted at a Giants game and put her in a wheelchair for the rest of her life.

She will be a first-grader, and she can hardly wait.

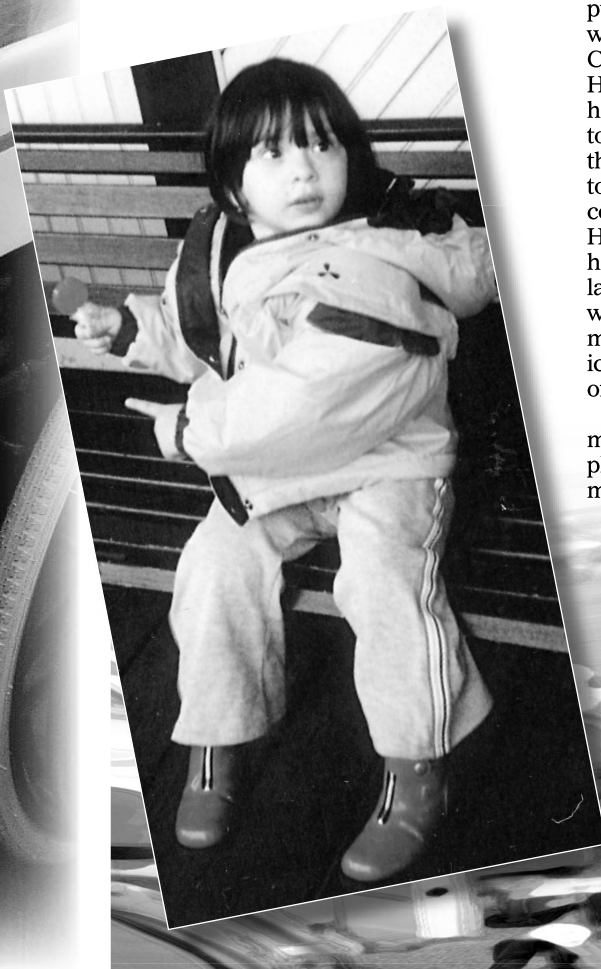
"The best part will be being with other kids," Antonia says, her voice sweet and small, her head tilted back in her chair. She is sitting in the TV room of the family home, a turreted colonial in a quiet Cliffside Park neighborhood. She has a tracheostomy tube in her throat and a body brace to help straighten her spine. There is an oxygen tank and spools of wires and tubes nearby, an entire corner of the room filled with medical equipment. She is surrounded by her beloved Magic School bus books, her room

painted in pink and purple. They are Antonia's favorite colors.

"I just wanted to liven things up for her," Ron Verni says, smiling faintly as his daughter's ventilator beeps in the background. A few days after Antonia was born — a month premature — at Mount Sinai Medical Center, Ron Verni went to a 26th St. florist and bought his baby daughter 1,000 pink roses. He is an accountant by trade. He hasn't worked in that vocation, or any other, since Oct. 24, 1999.

It was a day that began with Ron and Fazila Baksh-Verni leaving their Cliffside Park home, taking 2-year-old Antonia on a pumpkin-picking trip to New Hope, Pa., and with 30-year-old Daniel Lanzaro leaving his Cresskill home and purchasing a six-pack of Heineken at 10:30 in the morning. Lanzaro headed to Giants Stadium, scalping a ticket to see the Giants play the Saints. By 4 p.m., the Giants had their most lopsided home victory in a decade, a 31-3 romp. By 5:45, at the corner of Terrace Ave. and Cleveland Ave. in Hasbrouck Heights, a residential neighborhood on a ridge overlooking the Meadowlands, Lanzaro's red 1994 Ford pickup truck was crossing a double-yellow line and slamming into the Vernis' Toyota Corolla, a horrific intersection of two families' lives, neither of them ever to be the same.

Antonia broke her neck and spent 11 months in the hospital and rehab, a quadriplegic in need of round-the-clock care. Her mother went into a coma, needed recon-



Fazila Verni helps daughter Antonia work through exercises in their Cliffside Park, N.J., home. Antonia was paralyzed after drunk driver Daniel Lanzaro (opposite page), on his way home from a Giants game, rammed into family's car in Oct. 1999. Pictured right, Antonia just hours before fateful crash.